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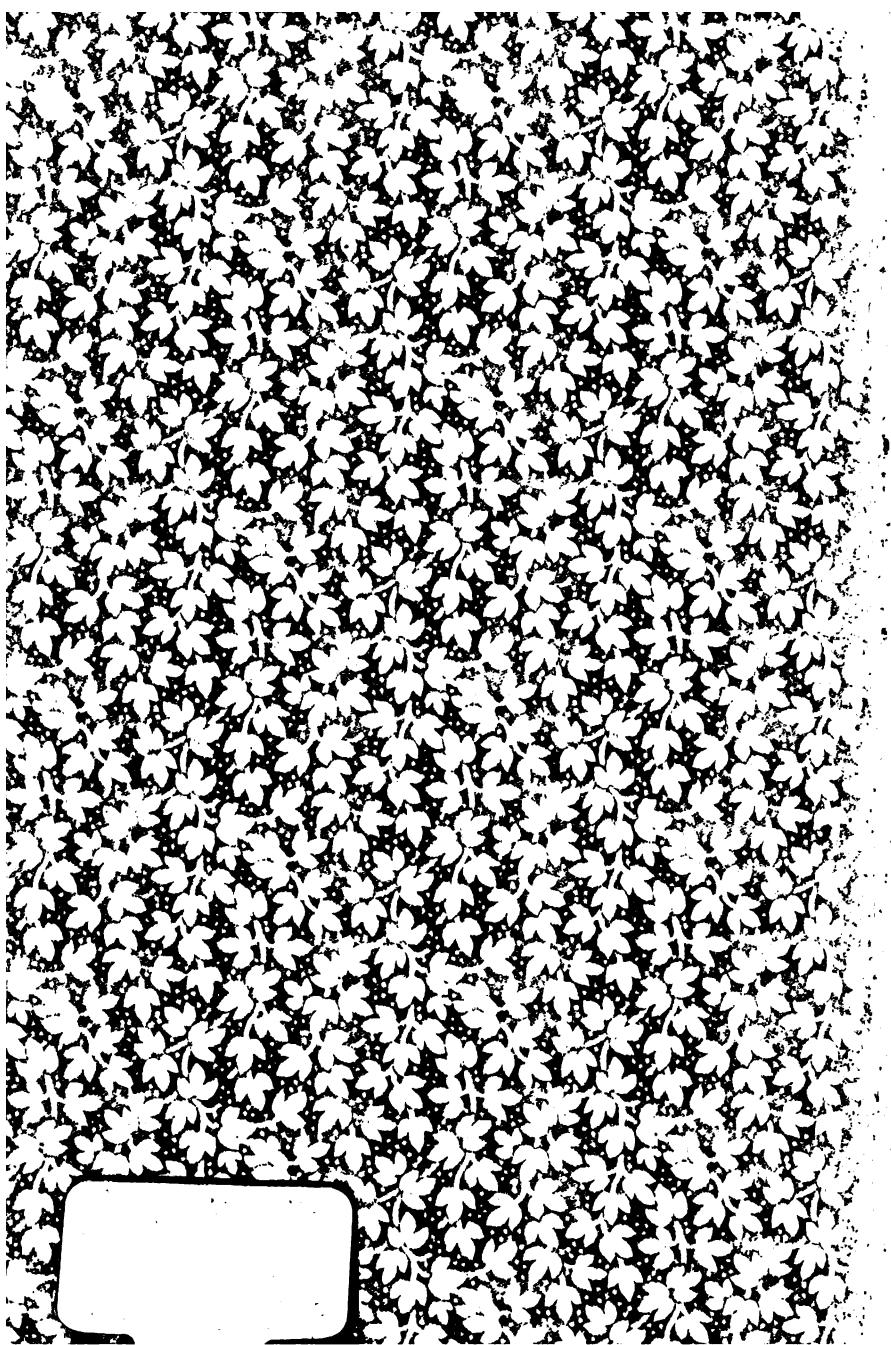
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ON FOREIGN SOIL



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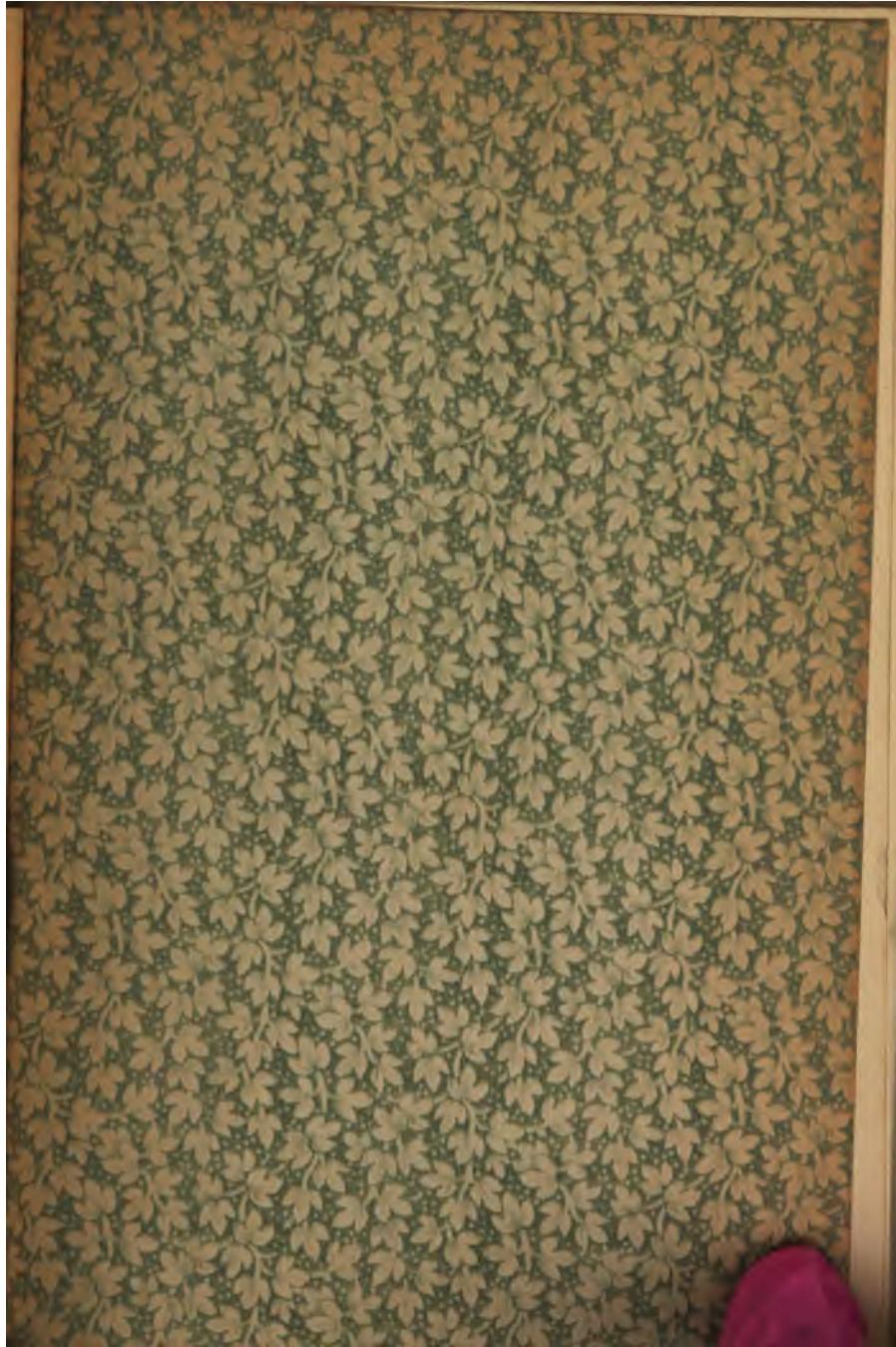
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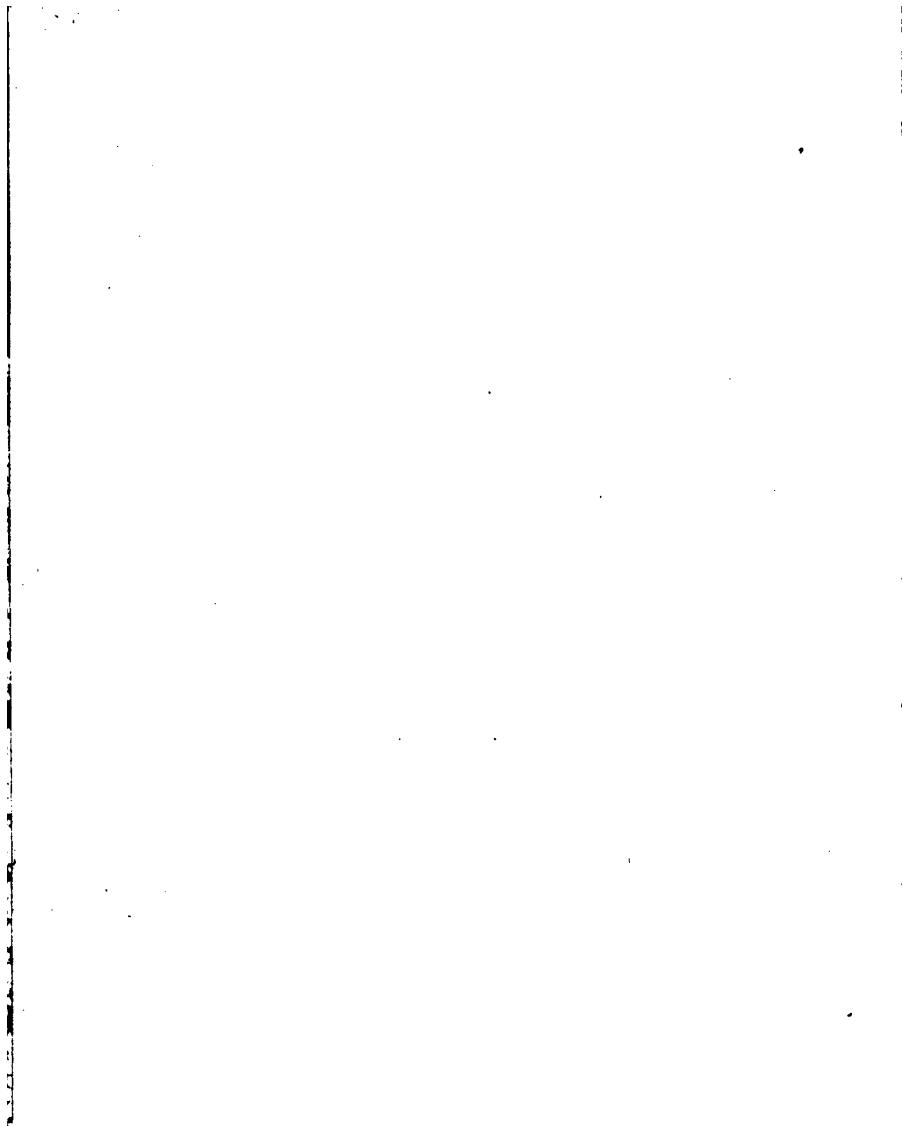
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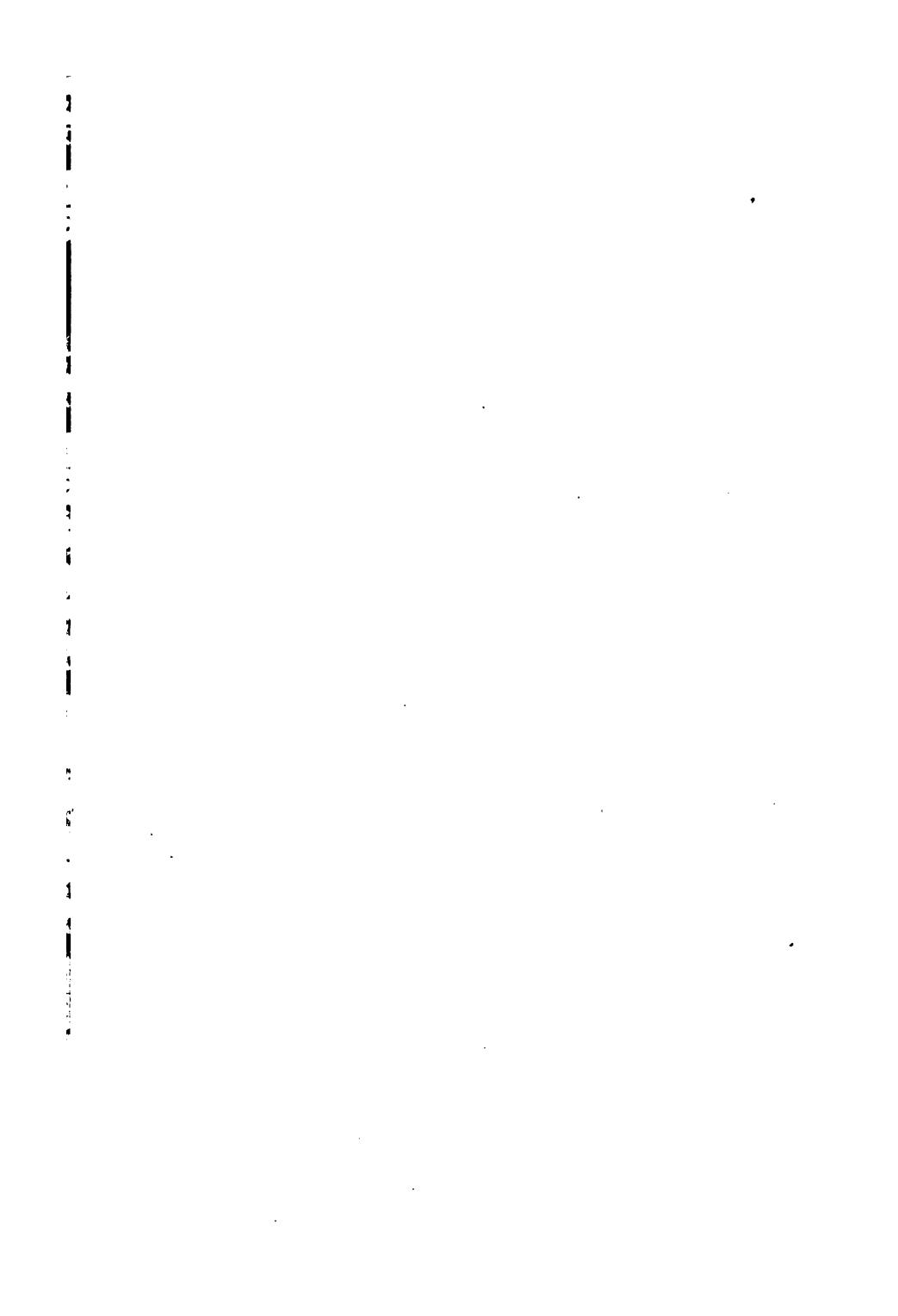
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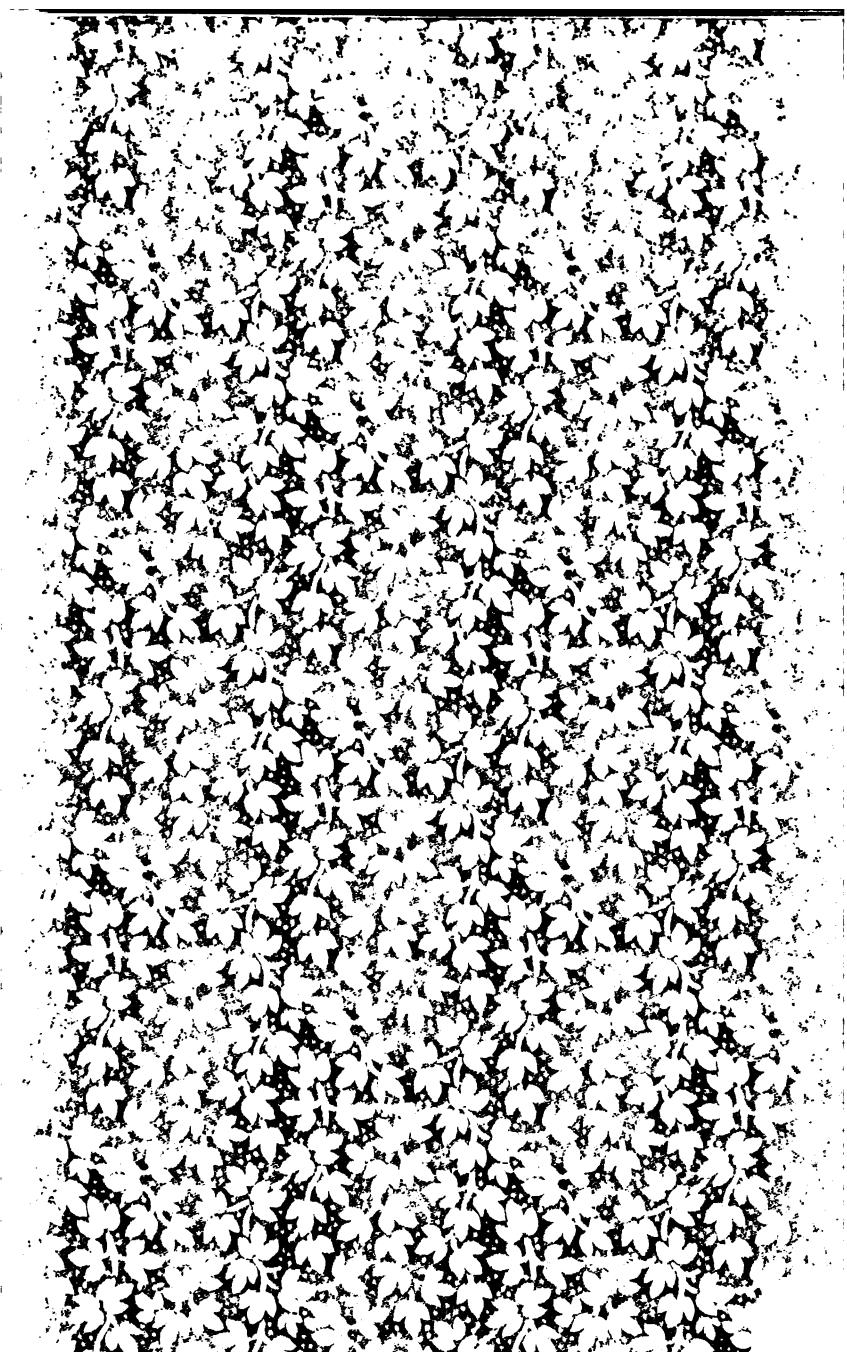


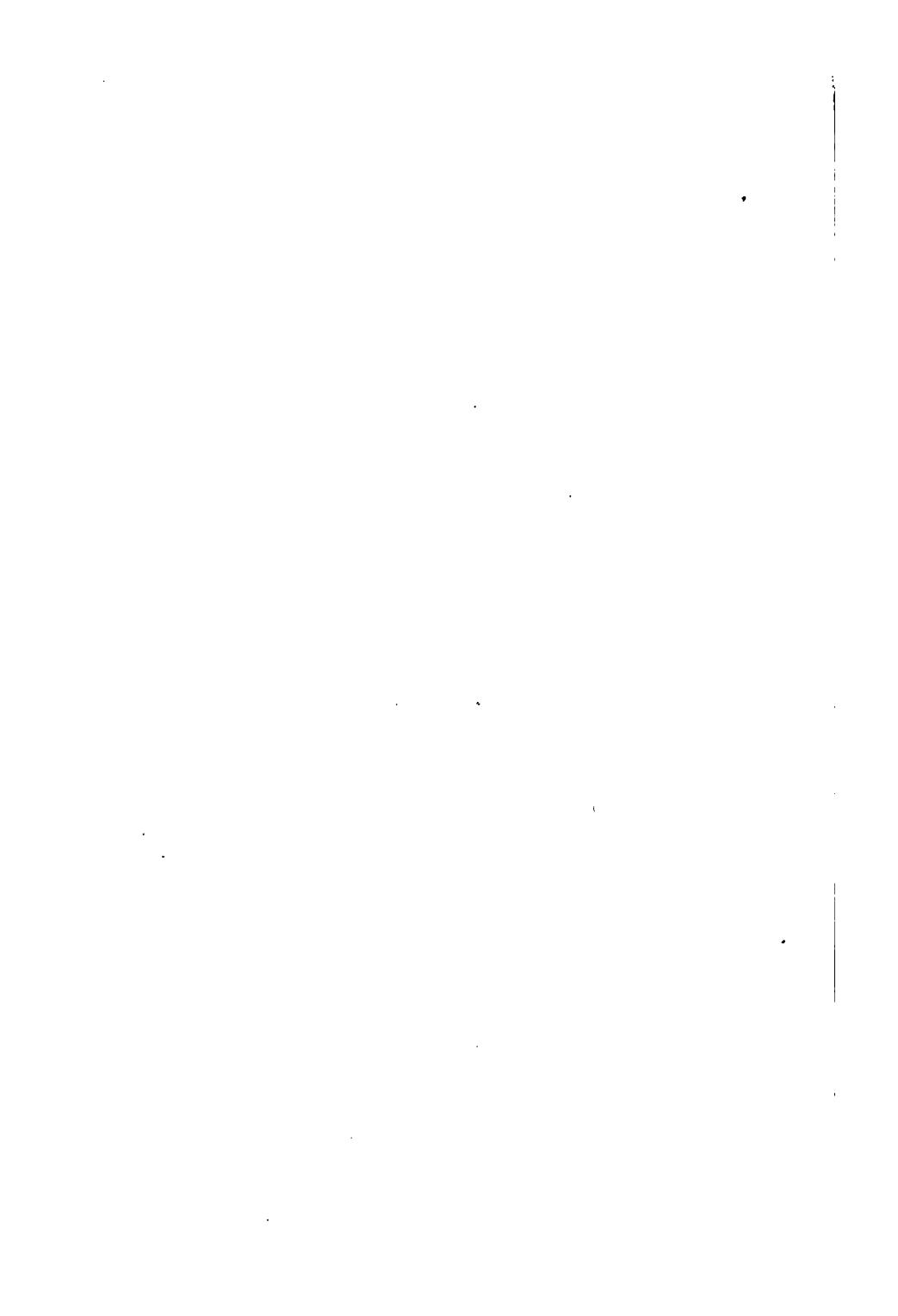


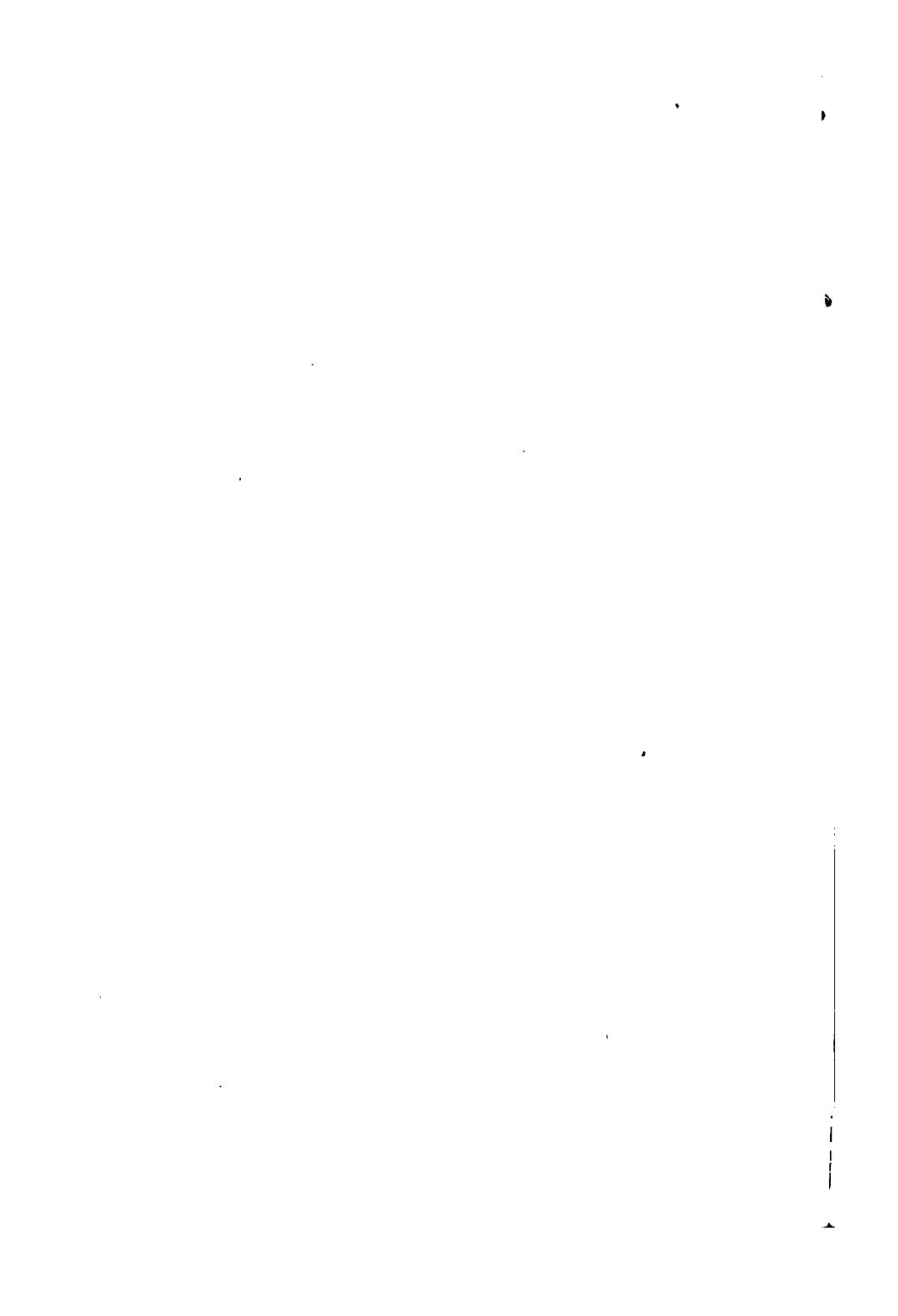




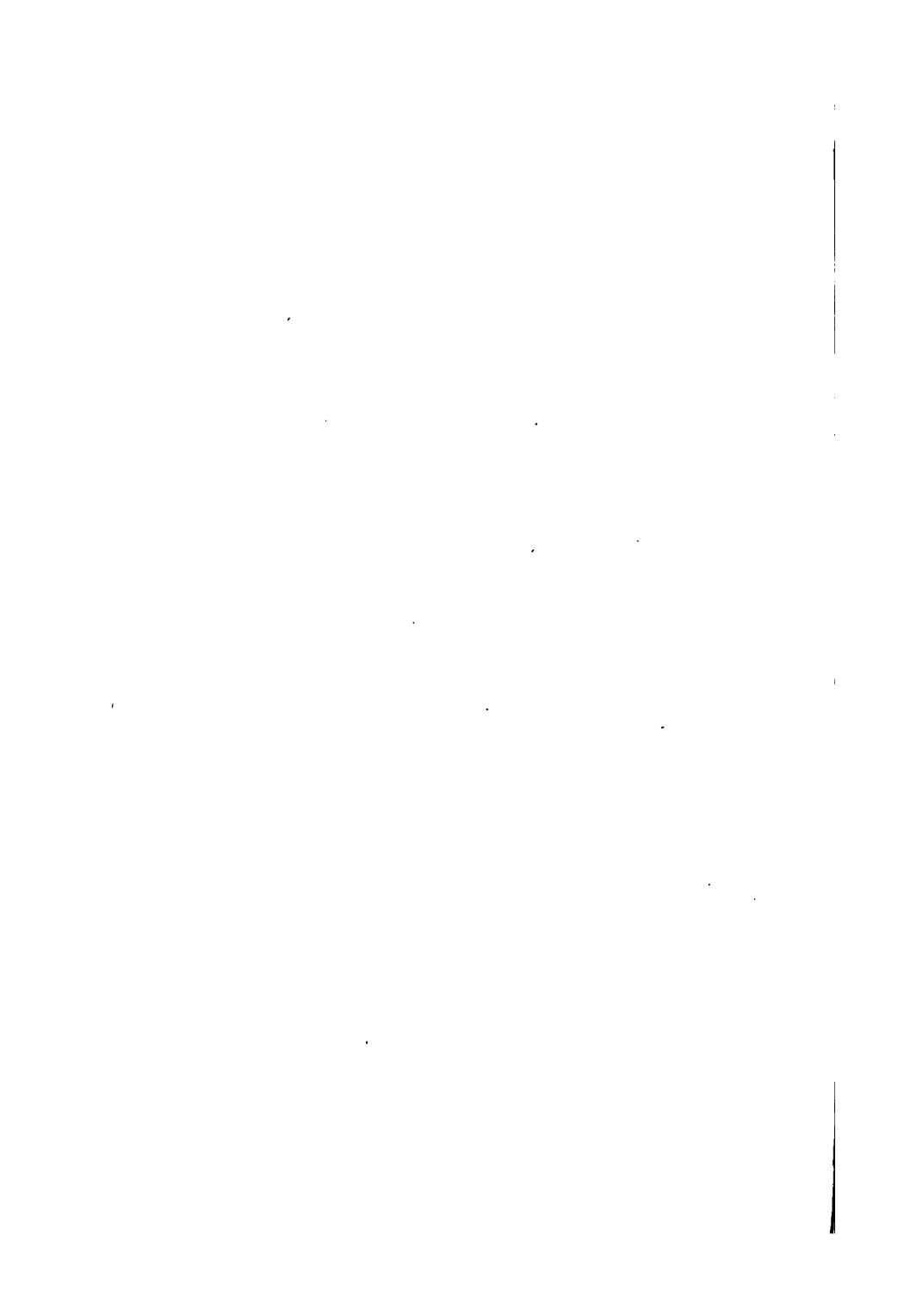
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ON FOREIGN SOIL.



ON FOREIGN SOIL.

A NOVEL.

BY

M. MONTGOMERY CAMPBELL,

AUTHOR OF 'AMICO'S LITTLE GIRL,' ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I.

	PAGE
HERBERT MARLEY'S HOME,	I

CHAPTER II.

I SANG IT FOR YOU,	26
--------------------	----

CHAPTER III.

PERPLEXED,	36
------------	----

CHAPTER IV.

A STRAY VOLUME,	48
-----------------	----

CHAPTER V.

EIN MÄDCHEN AUS DER FREMDE,	70
-----------------------------	----

CHAPTER VI.

CONFICTING INFLUENCES,	95
------------------------	----

CHAPTER VII.	PAGE
HIGH ART LADIES,	126
CHAPTER VIII.	
DIVIDED,	141
CHAPTER IX.	
A LONG SUMMER,	165
CHAPTER X.	
HARVEST-HOME PREPARATIONS,	199





ON FOREIGN SOIL.

X



CHAPTER I.

HERBERT MARLEY'S HOME.

HE country seat where my hero was born, filled no unworthy place amongst the ‘stately homes of England ;’ its acres were broad, its timber was splendid ; the house itself, and the views therefrom, were all that could be desired. The building, which was grey with age, and

VOL. I.

A

for the most part covered with ivy, dated from the twelfth century. It had been a priory in old days, and was still so called. The chapel once used by the monks, and several handsomely carved confessionals, yet remained. When any repairs were undertaken, such traces of the original inmates were found as skulls, coffins, and even on one occasion an entire skeleton, which told its own sad tale of an immured victim.

The hall at Marley was the favourite meeting place of the family, when leading their cosy home-life, and when there were no visitors, in whose honour Mrs Marley considered it necessary to adjourn to the large drawing-room.

The charm of the hall was, I feel tempted to say, its orderly confusion ; but, perhaps, it would be more correct to call it informality. There was no stiffness,

yet everything was arranged to ensure the comfort of the occupants, the useful and ornamental being most happily intermingled. There were writing-tables, furnished with all necessaries, and solid-looking chairs standing before them. One large table was covered with books, and smaller ones were placed here and there, on which bowls of rare china stood, filled with orchids and other hothouse flowers.

Easy lounges and seats of all sorts abounded. On the walls hung pictures by old English masters, chiefly family portraits.

A magnificent organ stood in a recess at one end of the hall; at the other was a carved fireplace of old oak, guarded on either side by the figure of a knight in full armour.

One January afternoon a girl sat on a

low seat in front of the fire, toying with the ears of a colley dog, whose handsome head rested on her knee.

This was Blanche Stapeleton.

Though no relation, she was yet far too much a child of the house for Mrs Marley to dream of making any change in their mode of living for her. The Stapeletons and Marleys were neighbours and old friends.

Since the preceding autumn it had been understood between the two families, though not formally given out, that Blanche was to marry Herbert, the Marleys' only son,—a fact which gave Squire Marley supreme satisfaction.

' You will not find a girl to beat Blanche in any part of the kingdom,' he was wont to say. ' She is the perfection of an English girl—good-looking, good-tempered, has plenty of common sense ; and

sits on a horse as if she were moulded to it.'

What Mrs Marley thought of the match was less patent; indeed to find out her opinion on any matter was as difficult, as it was easy to discover that of the blunt, plain-spoken squire. The world had suspected her of more ambitious plans for her son; and it was rumoured in the county that she wished Herbert to wed Lady Margaret Cardross, Lord Knowlesworth's beautiful daughter. All the same she seemed satisfied with things as they were, and was very cordial to Blanche.

Any one wishing to be ill-natured might have said the fortune which would eventually come to Miss Stapeleton from her mother proved a tempting bait; for despite of the squire's fine income, Mrs Marley's extravagant ideas made money always acceptable. Perhaps the most

natural explanation was that she idolised her son, and was therefore ready to fall in with his views, though opposed to her own ; she thought him so handsome, intellectual, and like her own people.

She was one of Sir William Challenger's many beautiful and penniless daughters, of whom it was said, that they gloried in their poverty and ancient descent. Therefore when Mrs Marley, the proudest of them all, said, 'Herbert is a thorough Challenger,' it meant she considered him as near perfection as it is possible for mortal to be.

But, to return to Blanche.

She had just come back from a long visit to Nice. Her mother's sister always spent the winter on the Riviera, and liked having one of her nieces with her. As soon as another cousin had come out to take her place, Blanche had hastened back

to England, that she might go to Marley before Herbert returned to Oxford.

On that particular January afternoon she had driven over from the Croft, her father's place, to spend a few days at the Priory, and on passing the station had picked up her betrothed.

Herbert was returning from a visit to Monsignor Marley, his father's pervert cousin, who, left early an orphan, had been brought up at the Priory, and was very dear to the squire ; far dearer, indeed, than the latter's own elder brother, who had been very wild, and after being mixed up in a dishonourable money transaction, had gone off to America, where he was reported to have died under most distressing circumstances.

Cyril Marley had become a Roman Catholic at the time when the Oxford movement and Tract XC. had led to so

much controversy in the Anglican communion, lacking patience, like other greater men, to watch, wait for, and help forward the great revival in the English Church.

This was a lasting sorrow to the squire, and made Mrs Marley, herself a staunch church - woman, tremble when her son's æsthetic tastes led him into ritualism, lest he should follow in the Monsignor's steps.

The full notes of the organ echoed through the hall, now sounding forth mightily, like the roar of the tempest ; now lulled and hushed into peace-speaking tones, suggestive of divine calm amid the tumult of human passion ; then dying softly away, till at length all was still.

There was a moment of silence ; upon which Blanche said, in a low tone,—

‘ Oh, Herbert, it is so beautiful ! ’

‘ I thought you would like it,’ was the

simple answer, in a voice which had a pleasant, frank ring; and sending away the servant, who had acted as blower, Herbert Marley came forward and threw himself into a seat by the side of Blanche. He was tall, slight, with a well-shaped head and broad forehead, from which the soft brown hair was carefully brushed back. His smooth, handsome face, which looked young for four-and-twenty, was rendered singularly attractive by the candour and gentleness which shone in his brown eyes. He formed a marked contrast to Blanche, who had a transparent, almost colourless complexion, showing the blue veins on her forehead and temples; hair of the reddish-golden hue seen in Titian's pictures, and large grey eyes with ever-varying expression. She was no fashion-book beauty with a waspish waist, but symmetrically proportioned and graceful in all her move-

ments, so that her well-cut dress of navy-blue cloth became her admirably.

'You must be delighted,' she said, 'to have an organ of your own?'

'Yes, it is nice to have one at last, on which I can play whenever I feel inclined ; and this is a very good one. I have had to wait a long time for it. Father wanted to give it to me at my coming of age, you know ; but he thought of it too late. Then mother's insisting on our foreign tour, and one thing and another came in the way, so that I did not have it till this Christmas. Ever since I came from Oxford I have played a great deal. The long frost spoiling the hunting has given me much spare time.'

'I don't know if it is because I have not heard you for so long, but somehow I have enjoyed listening more than ever,' Blanche said. 'You seem to have gained greatly

in power. I must not make you conceited, but your playing is quite masterly.'

'Oh, it is not half I feel it could, and hope it some day may be,' answered Herbert. 'You know I have had so much practice at St Ethelred's as well as here. It is such an enjoyment to me. One can tell out all one's thoughts to an organ; and, I daresay, to-day somebody being present helped me,' he added, in a lower tone.

If Blanche gave any answer to the latter part of this speech, it must have been her eyes which spoke it. Aloud she said,—

'Yes, it was nice, on account of the organ, that your London house last year was so near St Ethelred's; and it was very good of Doctor Benson to let you play on it. Yet I almost wish you had not been thrown so much into the society of the clergy there. I don't like those extreme

ritualists. They may say what they like, yet I am sure they are Romanists at heart, and overstep the teaching of our Prayer-Book about confession, making it almost compulsory. All that is un-English, and “a yoke neither we nor our fathers could bear.”

Herbert smiled quietly at this little display of sound Protestantism, and remarked,—

‘ You know, Blanche dear, that is a subject on which you and I don’t quite agree.’

‘ No. I wish with all my heart we did. I certainly shall never bring myself ~~to~~ like the ritualists. Their endless ceremonies jar on and fidget me; but what I dislike as much as anything is the tone of their manuals of devotion, where, if there are not invocations of saints, there are certainly “ Hail Maries.” ’

Herbert smiled again.

‘Why, Blanche, how often I have told you that the *Ave Maria* in its ancient form, without the *ora pro nobis*, was meant in a totally different sense from the modern Roman. Keble approved of such an *Ave*. If my memory is right, he compares the repeating of it to

“Children, who with good-morrow come
To elders in a far distant home.”

And I myself often say it. I always do so when I stay with cousin Cyril, and hear the chapel bell ringing the Angelus.’

‘Yes, Herbert, I know you look at all those things in a much more poetical light than I do. Probably by the time you are a white-haired squire like your father, you will have learnt to laugh at those little vagaries. That is what we think, don’t we, Blunder?’

The last remark was addressed to the

colley dog, who looked up sagaciously in her face, and rubbed his tawny muzzle affectionately against her hand.

Blanche meant to be conciliatory, for on second thoughts she felt a little repentant of having so soon begun the one subject on which Herbert and she could not agree. Yet she scarcely knew how keenly his mind was just then dwelling on all matters connected with religion, or might have answered him in a less bantering tone.

The entrance of his mother made a break in the conversation.

After welcoming Blanche, Mrs Marley had considerably withdrawn, on the plea of visiting some of her cottagers, and left the young people to the enjoyment of a *tête-à-tête*. Her return was the signal for afternoon tea to be brought in; and talk turned on general subjects, such

as the county, the hunting, and the cottagers.

Mrs Marley was really a Lady Bountiful to those who lived on her husband's estates, being ready with help and sympathy in any case of distress. Indeed, with her, as with many haughty women, her inferiors shared better at her hands than her equals. To the latter she could be curt in manner, yet was too truly a lady to be patronising to the former.

Next to visiting amongst her poor people, music and hunting were her favourite pursuits. She rode well, and looked to advantage on a horse, her figure having lost little of its early beauty. ‘I hope,’ she said to Blanche, ‘that you are as keen as ever about hunting. After the long frost, we are looking forward anxiously to to-morrow. I suppose you know the meet is to be at Brendon Hill?’

‘Oh yes,’ Blanche replied. ‘I am glad to be able to have a chance of riding again, after spending day after day on the Nice promenade, for Aunt Margaret to take “sun-baths,” as the people say there, Hunting is much nicer than sitting on a bench under a white umbrella, lined with green, listening to the latest piece of gossip from the *Cercle*, or the last tragedy at Monte Carlo; and I am very pleased to find Comet looking in such beauty. All he wants is exercise, and I mean to give him plenty. What are you going to ride?’

‘My new horse, Dainty Dan. I don’t admire his name, but have not, as yet, thought of another. Perhaps you can help me to choose. He is such a handsome creature. Richard bought him at Captain Bloome’s sale; and I never rode a horse that suited me so well. You will

see to-morrow, how he jumps,' said Mrs Marley, quite enthusiastically.

Her face was pleasant to look at on the rare occasions on which she became animated. Usually it wore a cold, haughty expression, which made her far less attractive than her handsome son, whom she closely resembled. Her hair, which had turned grey early, was drawn up high over her forehead, her eyebrows were dark and arched, her features remarkably regular. She might have sat for a picture of Marie Antoinette.

'Talking of to-morrow's hunting, I see by my wife's face,' said a cheery voice.

It was that of the squire, who in coming in, had only caught sight, amid the increasing darkness, of Mrs Marley's unusually serene countenance, on which the full light of the fire fell. 'Who is here? I cannot make you all out. Has Blanche come?'

'Yes, here I am, very glad to find myself once more at Marley,' was the bright rejoinder.

'That is right, my lass. How are you? Blooming, as one of the Nice roses, I hope?'

Blanche returned this greeting very cordially; she heartily reciprocated the kind old gentleman's affection.

Richard Marley was the genuine type of an English squire of the old school—even retaining in his dress the fashion of forty years ago, and remaining faithful to a stock and gaiters. Genial, kind-hearted, beloved by old and young, high and low, and possessing a good spice of insular prejudices. A staunch Conservative, and thorough John Bull, he hated Radicals and foreigners equally. Touch on these two topics, and you were sure to rouse the British Lion; otherwise you might count

on his good temper even through a long, hard frost, and when Mrs Marley tried him most.

At a very early age he had wed a distant cousin of Mrs Stapeleton's ; it was a love-match, and all augured well. Alas ! ere two years had passed, his young wife was laid to rest in the family vault at Marley Church, and with her the infant son, who had cost her life. Squire Marley was disconsolate, and remained many years without marrying again, though his friends often sought to impress upon him, how desirable it was the estate should not pass to a distant and somewhat disreputable cousin, to whose influence he himself and many others attributed his elder brother's ruin.

For a long time all endeavours to make him seek a second wife proved fruitless. At length, however, he met Miss Adelaide

Challenger at a friend's house, and shortly afterwards proposed and was accepted.

Some said it was her riding which had attracted him—others, more ill-natured, her social position ; for she was connected through her mother with the oldest Scotch nobility. Several people said it was a most ill-advised match on account of the bride's passionate disposition, and prophesied a separation. All wished to appear as if they had been behind the scenes, and, as is usual in such cases, were only indulging in idle surmises.

Was it a love-match ?

It would be rash to venture to pronounce sentence ; all that can be known for certain is that, in spite of a good deal of sparring, Mr and Mrs Marley jogged on through life better than the gossips expected.

Who can judge fairly in such a matter ?

It is but a small minority, who make due allowance for the way in which different temperaments re-act on one another; yet the very form which the virtues of the one character assume are often a source of trial to the other.

Not long after the squire had entered the hall and greeted Blanche, Colonel Dursley and Mr Wilmot were announced—officers from the neighbouring garrison town, who had been asked to hunt.

By the time they had exchanged a few words with their host and hostess, the dressing-gong sounded, and later Blanche and Herbert found no further opportunity for a chat by themselves.

Blanche did not feel quite easy in her mind, and was not at all sorry when the time for retiring came, and she was able to be alone and think over the events of the day.

Yet the evening had passed very pleasantly. Neither Colonel Dursley nor Mr Wilmot had great conversational powers, but they were good listeners ; whilst Mrs Marley could talk well if in the mood for it ; and the squire was always ready with a joke or good story.

Next morning the weather was all that could be desired, and at breakfast every one was discussing the prospects of a run. The country was excellent for hunting, and the Knowlesworth hounds and their master were highly esteemed.

‘The meet is so near, Blanche, that there is no need to drive,’ said Mrs Marley, ‘and we must start in half-an-hour.’

They did so, and it would have been hard to have found a better mounted or more pleasing group of riders.

The squire kept close to Blanche’s side, carrying on a brisk conversation. Colonel

Dursley was riding next to Mrs Marley, and Herbert, seeing there was no chance of a *tête-à-tête* with Blanche, dropped behind with Fred Wilmot.

Near Brendon Hill they met Colonel Stapeleton, whom Squire Marley invited to dine and sleep at the Priory.

' You know that boy of mine leaves us to-morrow,' he said ; ' so of course you will come for his last night.'

The run proved the most successful of the season, and Dainty Dan outdid himself.

' I see you have not forgotten how to ride, though you have been all the winter amongst foreigners,' remarked the squire, as he came home in the afternoon, glancing with admiration at Blanche, whose cheeks were tinged like the petals of a blush rose.

' You must keep Herbert up to the mark,' he added. ' I do believe the lad would as soon sit for hours playing the organ, as

have a good ride across country. That is all the fault of those parsons, I am certain.'

It was a sore subject with Richard Marley, that his son should not care more for hunting, shooting, and country pursuits in general. Herbert could ride well, and was not a bad shot ; but his heart was not in such things. He took part in them to please his father ; his own tastes were the discussion of abstruse questions, in which he often got beyond his depth ; painting, about which he knew a good deal, though his own productions savoured strongly of the *amateur* ; and, above all, music, wherein he excelled.

' It really seems to me as if the lad would make a Michael Angelo, or a Beethoven, far more easily than a country gentleman,' Squire Marley once said to his wife. ' He has such a dreamy manner sometimes, that I begin to despair of his

ever taking a practical, common-sense view of life. I feel, as if it would need some very unusual circumstance to rouse him, and show whether he has any real stuff in him or not.'





CHAPTER II.

'I SANG IT FOR YOU.'

OLONEL STAPELETON kept his promise and came to dinner. He was a thorough contrast to the squire, tall, thin, almost gaunt-looking though a strong man, and decidedly pompous. He was not a great favourite with the Marleys, though always well received on account of the friendship, which had existed for generations between their family and his.

His wife, on the other hand, was tenderly reverenced by them. By nature

a most active woman, she had for years been unable to walk owing to a carriage accident. One of her husband's weak points was, that he thought himself an excellent judge of horse-flesh, and a first-rate whip. Though they conceded the first, few of his acquaintances agreed with him on the latter point, considering him a very careless driver. There were many stories told amongst them about Bob Stapeleton's driving exploits. To them his vanity afforded amusement ; but it cost his wife her health. Eight years before our meeting with him at Marley, he had bought a horse, certainly beautiful, but which had the reputation of being unmanageable in harness. This was almost a charm in his eyes ; after giving it one not too-successful trial, he insisted on taking his wife out driving. The result was an upset, he escaping with a few bruises, she receiving

an injury to the spine, which made her an invalid for life. The once energetic woman accepted this cross with a sweet patience, surprising even those who knew her best.

Though spending her days on her sofa, and rarely even being able to be drawn about the grounds in an invalid chair, her influence extended not only over her family, but through the large and scattered parish. Her sons and daughters looked on ‘mother thinks so,’ as sufficient sanction for deciding any moot point, and friends far and near valued her opinion, both on literary and practical questions. But of this more anon.

Knowing Colonel Stapeleton was fond of music, Mrs Marley suggested spending the evening in the hall, that they might hear Herbert play the organ. They were well rewarded. The young musician

treated them to parts of Mozart's Twelfth Mass, some of Mendelssohn's soul-stirring melodies, and a grandly quaint fugue of Sebastian Bach's, and his rendering of all these was so exquisite, that even Fred Wilmot, whose knowledge of music was limited to the newest valse and latest popular melody, sat listening entranced, as if a new world had opened to him.

‘Herbert, you are a wonderful fellow,’ said Colonel Stapeleton, when his future son-in-law paused, modestly expressing a fear that he had tired his audience. ‘Now we must try and persuade your mother to sing, and you must accompany her.’

Mrs Marley’s voice was fine, and she had been well taught ; if there was a fault to be found with her singing it was that it was at times a little harsh, not *sympathique*. She was not often willing to let herself be heard ; but this being

Herbert's last night, consented for his sake.

She chose a sacred air by Cherubini, and rendered it with much power; yet perhaps because it needed greater tenderness, or because the hall was not high enough to do justice to her voice, the hearts of the listeners remained untouched, and she only elicited a few conventional thanks from them.

'Come, Blanche,' said the squire, 'you must not be the only performer to be allowed a holiday. What are you going to sing?'

'I really don't know; I have brought no music. Besides my singing would sound so poor after what we have just heard.'

This was said with perfect simplicity. Blanche thought very little of her own musical powers, and a great deal of Mrs Marley's; yet her voice, though lacking

the fulness of the latter's, was surpassingly sweet and of a good quality.

'We are not going to let you off,' said Squire Marley; 'are we, Stapeleton?'

'No; sing something, Blanche,' said the colonel. He was very proud of his daughter.

Thus pressed, Blanche went to the organ, and, after a short consultation with Herbert, chose that beautiful poem of Miss Procter's, 'Cleansing Fires,' which Herbert had himself set to music.

The accompaniment was soft and well-suited to Blanche's voice; and, as her articulation was particularly distinct, all present could hear the touching words of the song:—

'Let thy gold be cast in the furnace,
Thy red gold, precious and bright,
Do not fear the hungry fire
With its caverns of burning light.'

And thy gold shall return more precious,
Free from every spot and stain ;
For gold must be tried by fire !
As a heart must be tried by pain.

In the cruel fire of Sorrow,
Cast thy heart, do not faint or wail ;
Let thy hand be firm and steady,
Do not let thy spirit quail :
But wait till the trial is over,
And take thy heart again ;
For as gold is tried by fire,
So a heart must be tried by pain !

I shall know by the gleam and glitter
Of the golden chain you wear,
By your heart's calm strength in loving,
Of the fire they have had to bear.
Beat on true heart for ever ;
Shine bright, strong golden chain ;
And bless the cleansing fire,
And the furnace of living pain.'

A feeling, half of foreboding, half of readiness to do or bear whatever the future might have in store for him, came over Herbert as he listened to the pathos with which Blanche sang these words ;

and long after, amidst misgivings, doubts and perplexities, the memory of that hour came back to him like the touch of an angel of peace.

Silence, that awed silence which is often the highest praise, greeted the close of the song. Herbert bowed his head for a moment over the keys, as if lost in thought ; but as Blanche moved to go, he took her hand, drew it gently towards him, and said, in a tone so low that none save herself could hear,—

‘ My darling.’

Then he let the slender fingers go.

Led by some irresistible impulse, which she could not have explained to herself, Blanche answered under her breath, with a display of emotion most unwonted in her.

‘ Don’t forget it. I sang it for *you*.’

Then she moved away, and rejoined the circle round the fire.

After breakfast next morning, Herbert and she sauntered out into the grounds together in the direction of the hothouses, to look—so they said—at some new orchids the squire had bought. If that was their only motive, their botanical studies must have been very minute, for they did not return for nearly an hour. Perhaps a visit had to be paid to Comet to see how he fared after his previous day's work.

Whatever they said to each other during that time, the ritualistic discussion did not form part of the conversation. Blanche was loth to begin ; Herbert did not make the faintest allusion to it, and there were plenty of other things to say.

By twelve o'clock Herbert started for Oxford.

'Good-bye, my boy,' said Colonel Stapleton, as they parted. 'Mind you pay us a visit at Easter.'

'That you may be sure, I shall,' was the ready answer; 'and once at the Croft, you will not easily be rid of me.'





CHAPTER III.

P E R P L E X E D.

BLANCHE was not sorry to leave Marley, and return to the Croft, two days after Herbert had gone back to Oxford. Though Mrs Marley and the squire were very kind, a longing crept over her to be once more at home, and able to think quietly over the events of the last few days in the stillness of her mother's morning-room.

The four daughters took it in turn to read to Mrs Stapeleton. None of them shared her literary tastes to any very great

degree, and often thought the books she chose heavy ; but all valued the few hours alone with her, when the reading was often laid aside, and their own interests were discussed at leisure.

‘ Hurrah ! here is Blanche,’ cried a boy’s voice, as the pony carriage drove up to the hall door of the Croft. ‘ I am so glad you are come back ; it has been awfully slow without you. It is just time for the school-room tea. You will come, won’t you, Blanche ?’

‘ I suppose I should never hear the end of it, if I didn’t,’ answered Blanche, with a mock air of resignation. ‘ But you must make me some toast ; that is a bargain. We don’t get anything like school-room toast in the drawing-room. Now, run away, Bertie, and tell Miss Davis I am coming. I must go and have a peep at mother.’

Bertie was the youngest of the family, a plain boy, with dreamy-looking eyes and overhanging brows, which gained him a greater reputation for being fond of study than he really deserved. He was not very strong; and this was an excuse for his father, whose favourite he was, to have him constantly at home. Bertie knew this well enough, and made use of the knowledge. He was always changing tutors, being sent first to Bournemouth, then to the Isle of Wight, and now, after spending six weeks at a school in Devonshire, was home again for an indefinite length of time. Mrs Stapeleton saw the folly of all this, and remonstrated; yet, wise woman though she was, she could seldom overcome her husband's whims, but only seek as much as possible to counteract, without its being noticed, their baneful influence on his family.

Blanche crossed the hall, where stern-faced, broad-collared old Puritans frowned down upon her, and softly opening a door, said,—

‘Mother.’

‘So you are come back, my darling? Come in.’ There was nothing of the querulousness of the invalid in the tone in which these words were spoken; it was, on the contrary, so genial as to suggest that, if uttered by a constant sufferer, they must come from

‘A heart at leisure from itself to soothe and
sympathise.’

Yet this had been one of Mrs Stapeleton’s worst days.

She was a little, fragile woman, bearing a strong likeness to Blanche, only that the once reddish-golden hair was streaked with white, and the grey eyes looked even

larger than Blanche's, owing to the thinness of their owner's cheeks.

Mrs Stapeleton always wore black, and easy, plainly-made dresses, well-suited to one continually lying down. Whatever she had on was of the best material, though the cut was old-fashioned. If she possessed a special weakness, it was for handsome lace ; and she generally had a rich mantilla draped round her shoulders, and always the daintiest of frills adorning her throat and wrists. Her caps, if so they could be called, consisted of soft folds of lace, flowing back from her still thick and wavy hair.

'I am not going to wear a regular old woman's cap just yet,' she would say merrily to her girls ; 'and it would probably only get crushed by lying down, if I took to a stiff muslin erection.'

Her daughters were well content that

it should be so, disliking anything calculated to dispel the illusion that their counsellor and friend was no longer young.

Mrs Stapeleton's morning-room was just what any one who knew her might expect it to be. Though she could do nothing herself towards its arrangement, her taste ruled everything there. It was her children's pride to make it the prettiest room in the house, and they certainly succeeded.

The Croft was comfortable, but not at all picturesque—a solid-looking building of the Georgian era. Colonel Stapeleton saw no reason for substituting any other furniture for the ugly collection he had inherited, and which was in a thoroughly serviceable condition: consequently the dining-room, drawing-room, and library were by no means attractive to the eye.

Mrs Marley again and again tried to indoctrinate the colonel with her ideas of what a gentleman's house ought to look like in these days of high art, ideas which had led to her completely revolutionising the Priory. Still the master of the Croft remained obdurate, and declared what was good enough for his forefathers would do for him ; if his heir chose to go in for subdued tints, Queen Anne furniture, and other modern innovations, that was another matter. His wife's morning-room he let alone, being reasonable enough to see the fairness of her having her own way about that portion of the house, where the greater part of her life must be spent.

Now Mrs Stapeleton, though not sharing her husband's opinions, did not wholly agree with Mrs Marley ; and a rigid devotee of the present fashion in fur-

nishing might have picked many holes, and found inconsistencies in her arrangements. Yet, the fortunate majority who were admitted to her sanctum, were able to enjoy the impression made on them by a tastefully-furnished room, in blissful ignorance of faults, which greater knowledge of so-called high art might have caused to jar on their feelings.

After so long a preamble, it is but fair to describe this apartment. It was double. The part into which Blanche entered on her return from the Priory, was where Mrs Stapeleton passed most of the colder portion of the year. The walls were distempered with a bluish-grey hue, calculated to set off the views of Switzerland and Italy which hung on them. There was a good deal of light wood-carving about the room, two brackets, with several shelves, filling up corners, and along the

sides were bookshelves to match. The centre table was covered with a Brittany tablecloth, round which were worked little figures wearing the national costume. The furniture, including Mrs Stapeleton's couch, matched the walls. By her side stood an inlaid olive-wood table, brought by Blanche from Nice, and on it some books and a set of writing materials, also made of olive-wood.

Above the fireplace hung a looking-glass of Venetian workmanship, across which a spray of *Maréchal Neil* roses was painted ; the reflection of the flowers and foliage made them look most deceptively life-like. It would take too long to dwell particularly on the many pretty trifles which gave the finishing touches to this snugger ; there were bits of crewel-work made by the girls, Vallauris ware on the chimney-piece, graceful baskets from

Thun, filled with flowers, on the centre-table.

Everything was well chosen, and there was no over-crowding.

In winter, a heavy *portière*, with hand-somely-worked satin border ; in summer a light *écru* curtain, adorned with *macramé* lace, divided off the regular morning-room from what was a kind of conservatory ; Mrs Stapeleton called it her bower. At one end was glass, and a door with a porch and some steps led out into the grounds ; the rest was adorned with frescoes, the work of Herbert Marley. The frescoing represented trailing vines, with rich foliage and clusters of luscious grapes ; here and there a little piece of Italian scenery was cleverly introduced, and at the corners of the ceiling, playful cupids peeped down roguishly from between the leaves.

In this bower there were many beautiful plants, and the furniture was of rustic construction ; benches and tables were made of knotted branches, whilst gnarled stumps and monster mushrooms did duty for chairs. Mrs Stapeleton was fond of being carried here on days when it was not advisable to place her couch in the garden ; but in winter she was oftener in the inner room, where Blanche found her after interviewing Bertie.

‘ It has not been a very good day, I see by your eyes, mother,’ the girl said, taking the thin white hand in hers.

‘ Not very ; but now tell me about Marley.’

‘ Well, it was nice to go back there after being so long away ; and they were all very kind.’

This description was not given in an enthusiastic tone, and the listener at once

detected that her child was disappointed about something.

‘Sit down, my child,’ she said.

‘Not now, mother, thank you. I only came to ask how you were, and have promised Bertie to patronise the school-room tea.’

‘I am glad of that; you manage him better than the rest. I am afraid he is getting spoilt, and those arguments he has with Florry and Daisy generally end in a quarrel.’

‘Oh, I will keep excellent order to-day, you may be sure, mother,’ and with a loving kiss, Blanche left the room.





CHAPTER IV.

A STRAY VOLUME.

BLANCHE had been wise in telling Bertie to make toast. He was so absorbed in the occupation, as to have no time to carry on the usual war of words with his sisters. For the last few days the subject under discussion had been logic. Bertie said women never reasoned logically, they let themselves be led away by their inclinations. Florry and Daisy were duly indignant; the battle was none the less fierce, because the combatants knew next to nothing of what they were talking about.

It had made matters rather worse, that Daisy had laid the subject before Dick, their elder brother, who had gone back to Eton the day after Blanche went to Marley. His sixth-form wisdom was expected to decide the question one way or another ; but he only laughed, said they were ‘a set of muffs,’ and Bertie was getting ‘far too cheeky, and wanted licking.’

This verdict left all parties dissatisfied, most of all Bertie.

Miss Davis, the governess, led no enviable life amongst these riotous young people. It was a constant trouble to her, who really cared for books, that they did not do so ; whilst her low spirits were a grievance to them. She had mistaken her calling, or rather she would not have chosen it ; but circumstances had thrust it on her. This silent, rather discontented-looking woman was really clever, and

might have won no mean reputation as an authoress, but of being that she had little chance, lacking time and cash to begin with.

Do the authors, who get large sums for their first works, exist, be their merits ever so great, excepting in stories of very *un-real* life? Miss Davis greeted Blanche with something almost approaching to a smile. There was no one in the house who did not love the girl for her unselfishness and sweet, even temper. My heroine was not remarkable either for cleverness, or even, good-looking though she was, for beauty; but she was just as Squire Marley described her, 'the perfection of an English girl,' one such as many of our homes can boast of possessing, and without whom they would be far less happy than they are.

' You have just come in time, Blanche;

the toast is ready,' cried Bertie, whilst his sister was extricating herself from the profuse embraces of Florry and Daisy, two damsels of sixteen and thirteen, who bore a striking likeness to each other and their father.

'That will do, thank you. I must eat the toast whilst it is hot,' remarked Blanche, with an amused twinkle in her eyes, at length able to seat herself at the tea-table.

'What a splendid dishful you have made, Bertie. Here, Miss Davis, try some of it.'

Blanche felt for the governess, and often joined the school-room tea to let that much worried woman have a meal free of strife, so her object now was to keep the younger ones amused, and at the same time to draw on Miss Davis to enter into the general conversation.

'All the bread is new, excepting what the toast was made of,' remarked Daisy, 'and father says we must always have some that is stale on the table.'

'What is the good, as you never eat it?' inquired Bertie, argumentatively.

'It is wholesome,' said Florry, gravely. She was very matter-of-fact, and sublimely unconscious of having given Bertie an opening for renewing the attack.

'There you are again,' he began, in a teasing tone. 'Don't I say that girls—' Here Mary, Colonel Stapeleton's second daughter, put her head in at the schoolroom door,—'Why, Blanche, I did not know you had come home. Mother sent me to call on Mrs Brotherton.'

'What had you done wrong for mother to pass such a sentence on you?' Blanche inquired, merrily.

Mrs Brotherton was the Vicar's wife, a

stiff old lady, who knew how to say disagreeable things, and was consequently beloved by few.

‘It was rather you, who had done the mischief,’ Mary answered. ‘You were at home several days without going to see her, so mother, knowing how displeased she would be, sent me to pacify her. Of course I said you had been kept at home by sundry business before, but were looking forward to seeing her as soon as you returned from Marley.

‘Thank you, that was very considerate.’

‘Yes, wasn’t it? And by - the - bye, Blanche, mother wants one of Schiller’s plays to be read to her to-morrow. I think your German ought to be more fluent than mine, after living all the winter at a place where so many nations meet.’

‘That means, Molly dear, you want to hunt to-morrow, and I am to take the reading.’

‘Well, yes, if you will,’ said Mary.

‘Jolly for you, if Blanche will,’ put in Bertie, who cared most for his eldest sister. ‘Fancy having a good ride across country, instead of making one’s throat sore with these dreadful *gehabt habens*, and all the guttural sounds of which the Germans seem so fond. I say, Blanche, Herbert left a German book behind the last time he stayed here. I found it in the library yesterday. I know it is his, for his initials are in it. I don’t know much of the language, but I managed to read a page or two, and it seemed very queer and heathenish.

‘I daresay you found it a little beyond you, so don’t pass too severe a judgment on it,’ answered Blanche. ‘Give it to me

by-and-by and I will see that it is sent to Herbert.'

'I am afraid we have drunk all the best tea; still may I offer you a cup, Miss Mary?' asked the governess, looking ruefully at the teapot, whence she poured a weak-looking fluid.

'No, thank you; I am going to have tea with mother; I only came in here on my way downstairs, to see how you all were. Will you come with me, Blanche?'

'No, no, we can't let her go so soon,' was the reply which burst simultaneously from the lips of Bertie and the girls, and Daisy slipped her arm entreatingly through Blanche's, saying,—

'You won't go, will you?'

Hereupon Mary departed, and the grateful trio said,—

'You are a dear old thing, Blanche.'

Tea being over, Florry and Daisy were

to do some French reading, and Blanche seeing that Miss Davis looked as if her head ached, considerately volunteered to take her place. With a thankful 'You are very good,' the weary woman left the room, and Blanche, having induced Bertie to join, made her class get satisfactorily through several pages of Molière's *Bourgeois Gentil-homme*, though Bertie was prepared to criticise each part of the argument between Monsieur Jourdain and the philosopher.

'If you will argue, you must talk French,' Blanche said, in a tone which Bertie never thought well to contradict; and then there was peace, for the boy would have been sadly at a loss how to express himself in the language of Molière.

An hour having passed in this way, Blanche told Bertie he might bring her the volume, which he had said belonged

to Herbert ; and when he had brought it, and had gone with his sisters to have the usual evening's chat by their mother's couch, she drew a chair to the fire and turned over the leaves of the book. It was by Schopenhauer, to admire whom is as much the fashion in certain German circles as it is to rave about Wagner's music in others. Consequently, not only those who really relish such sickly, unwholesome reading, but many who do not, yet have not the honesty to say so, talk pathetically about *unser göttlicher Arthur*; foolish women above all being led away to praise what it is to be hoped they cannot admire, from the desire to be called enlightened.

Yet to put the blame on those who most deserve it, we must go back to the wide-spread evil of false professions and narrow zeal in the past, a not unnatural

consequence of which, has been the launching of a large part of a great nation into infidelity. Blanche knew little of dogmatic theology, though religion was the main-spring of her life; still a short perusal sufficed to make her feel surprised at Herbert's owning such a book; he, whom she looked upon as so particularly orthodox.

Still it was not fair to judge him behind his back, merely because an accident had showed that this work belonged to him. Men, of course, ought to be acquainted with the different sides of a question, and how could she know what authors he was expected to study?

The trifling incident would not have affected her in the least, had not several things during the last few days led her to suppose that something was troubling him. Changed he certainly was; there was a strange restlessness about him, to which

he had never before seemed a prey. Sometimes she had thought him about to begin on some subject, and then he seemed abruptly to change his mind. He was absent, too, in an unusual degree; and yet, with all this, his tenderness and devotion made her sure that it was no change in his love for herself that troubled him. He was her own still, and was not that enough.

Other difficulties time might solve; only he should have explained to her what filled his mind; he must have known that she would be ready to sympathise.

All the time that she had been joking with the younger ones, and making things smooth for Miss Davis, her mind had been wandering off to ruminate on these thoughts; and now that her attention was no longer needed for the French lesson, and she was alone, they returned to her with increased force.

Still as far as ever from understanding these matters, she went next morning to read to her mother. The two watched Mary and Colonel Stapeleton, as they rode past the window, on their way to the meet, and Mrs Stapeleton said,—

‘ You have not told me how you enjoyed your day’s hunting at Marley, Blanche. Your father said you had a very good run.’

‘ I enjoyed it immensely, mother. You know I am so fond of hunting.’

‘ You cannot be fonder of it than I used to be.’

‘ Oh, mother, it must be so hard for you to see the others start. I would give anything to see you ride like Mrs Marley.’

‘ One gets used to most things, child ; and, at any rate, I am too old to hunt now. Well, we must not waste the reading-

hour ; did Mary tell you I wanted one of Schiller's plays read to me this morning ?'

' Yes, mother.'

Blanche brought the book from a shelf, and began. She did not share Bertie's opinion of the German language, and liked Schiller's works. That morning she felt thoroughly able to throw herself into the spirit of the drama which she read. Mary Stuart's longings for the unattainable were very different from her own troubles ; yet a tale of woe often strikes a responsive chord in a heart that is sorrowing.

Sometimes Blanche read rather monotonously ; but, on that day, the unusual amount of feeling in her voice told that she felt in sympathy with her subject. In short, it touched her just enough, and not too much, to let her thoughts find an echo in her voice.

Mrs Stapeleton had been watching her, and when she closed the book, drew her two hands gently within her own, and held them there.

‘What is the matter, my child?’

Ah, there lay the difficulty. It may be comparatively easy to tell the story of a simple trouble, but so hard to explain, even to the most ready listener, worrying thoughts, which are none the less perplexing because they have hardly assumed a connected shape in our own brain.

‘There is nothing really the matter, mother.’

‘Nothing really; and still something, and it is about Herbert?’

Blanche gave no direct answer; instead, she asked, with seeming abruptness,—

‘Who is, or was, Schopenhauer, mother?’

‘A German author, who has turned

many foolish people's heads by his heathenish theories.'

'Ah, that is like what Bertie said.'

'Bertie! What does he know about Schopenhauer's works? He mustn't read them. It would not do to feed a young, half-formed mind on rationalistic philosophy.'

'Don't be afraid, mother. I think Bertie knows next to nothing about them.'

'Then Herbert does, I suppose?'

'Yes.'

And then Blanche broke a resolution she had half made, to send the book back to Herbert without speaking about it to anyone, and told Mrs Stapeleton of it, and all that had been worrying her during the past few days. When put into words, that *all* seemed very little; contradictory too, for had not Herbert even pleaded the cause of ritualism quite eagerly,

when speaking to her in the hall at Marley ?

' I think there is not much to be anxious about, my child,' said her mother. ' Herbert, like most thoughtful men, is very likely passing through a mental crisis, about which he may naturally hesitate to speak till he is sure of his own mind. It is not unlikely that the enthusiasm with which he has for a while taken up external observances, may have been followed by a change of feeling. He wants to be less given to theorising, and more to the practical duties of life. You must let him alone, Blanche. Send back the book, without making any remark upon it ; and be sure, when he feels he can, he will speak to you without any pressure being necessary from you. Trust him ; you must do so, or you will find marriage without trust, miserable.'

Blanche let herself be guided and sent

back the book with no comment, excepting to say Bertie had found it in the library and recognised it as Herbert's; then she tried to put her heart into the routine of daily life, and to keep from brooding over what must for the time remain a mystery to her.

Herbert merely acknowledged having received the volume, without further comment, and wrote as often as ever; but his letters were shorter and more filled with generalities, lacking the old confidential tone. Perhaps he was deep in his work. He was to leave Oxford in June, and Squire Marley hoped that he would take honours.

Hunting, going out with her father, keeping peace amongst the younger ones, attending on her mother, Blanche took her full share of all these things, and was glad to have her time so much filled up:

Lent came early that year; and in the beginning of February a ball at Lord Knowlesworth's was to close the winter gaieties in that part of the country. Colonel Stapeleton took his two eldest daughters.

Herbert Marley had come over from Oxford for the one night. He said he must leave early next morning, being unable to spare more time from his work. In short, he seemed disinclined to come at all, only his mother wished it.

Blanche went simply to meet him.

There was a large party from the Priory; and Mrs Marley looked very handsome in a crimson velvet dress trimmed with *point d'Alençon*. The long train added to her height; and people said they never remembered seeing her look so well.

A stranger, Captain Craufurd, had been

introduced to Blanche ; he had not long been quartered in the county, and asked her who Mrs Marley was. Having learnt her name, he asked,—

‘ Has she a son at Oxford ? ’

‘ Yes. He is here to-night.’

‘ Aw, indeed ! I have heard my youngest brother mention him. Wather a clevar fellow, gweat musician ; was vewy ritualistic, taken to atheism. Oh, yes, know all about him—believe those changes of opinion often happen ; know lots of fellows myself, who have done it.’

Captain Craufurd rattled on in this way, flying from one subject to the other with astounding rapidity. He always either talked very fast, or drawled in an unbearable fashion.

Blanche was glad to be saved from answering by more than an occasional yes or no. From the man’s tone, she

felt sure he exaggerated about most things ; yet the shaft had struck home, and she could not get rid of the pain it had caused.

When Herbert came to claim her, he was more tender than ever, and brighter also, she thought. Should she put an end to all misgivings by asking him if he had anything on his mind ? No ; a ballroom was not the place for such explanations. Soon, when it was time to go home, Herbert saw her to the carriage —a press of the hand, and the opportunity had gone by.

Next day she told her mother what she had heard. Mrs Stapeleton felt vexed ; still she adhered to her original decision, and said,—

‘ Blanche, darling, you must go on trusting him. He will be with us for some time, I hope, at Easter ; then, if

there is anything to tell, I feel sure you will learn it.'

Herbert's letters came as regularly as before the ball, and Blanche answered them cheerfully and tried to be patient, yet never had Lent seemed so long to her before.





CHAPTER V.

EIN MÄDCHEN AUS DER FREMDE.

OLONEL STAPELETON'S only sister had married a German diplomatist, Count Max von Herberstein; they had one child, a daughter named Gretchen. During her husband's lifetime Countess Herberstein had resided at various European embassies; after his death she went to live at his native place, having thoroughly identified herself with the tastes and customs of his nation, and liking to be where there was a court.

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Though caring little to return to England herself, she wished her Gretchen to pay ~~an~~ a visit, and wrote to express this desire to her brother.

Colonel Stapeleton answered that he should always be happy to receive his niece at the Croft, and hoped she would feel inclined to make a long stay there.

The result of the correspondence was that, on opening his letters one morning at breakfast, he announced to his children that their cousin Gretchen was to arrive in a few days' time, her mother having found an escort for her as far as London.

'I suppose I must go and meet her there myself,' he added, with the air of a martyr, though he was in reality always pleased to find an excuse to run up to town. 'Let me see, this is Tuesday, the very day on which Gretchen was to start. She was to stay two nights in Paris; and



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I must meet her on Friday at the Victoria Station. We shall just be able to catch the last train home ; so you may expect us by the 9.45 on that evening.'

This piece of news was received with surprise, and much commented on by the various members of the family. They knew their father had talked about his sister's intention of sending her daughter to make acquaintance with her English relations, but had only looked on it as a remote possibility.

Florry and Daisy were all curiosity to see their foreign cousin, and made up their minds to like her.

Mary and Blanche shared to some degree in their excitement, though amused at their childish eagerness. They hoped to be good friends with Gretchen, though Mary said she thought they might find her a bore.

As to Bertie, he vowed he would hate her, was sure she was affected, and would, at the same time, shock their English notions by her continental manners. He spent the days, till the looked-for Friday, in assuring Florry and Daisy that all foreigners were barbarians, dirty, heathenish, given to eating with their knives ; and, in short, imparted a great deal of stray information to his school-room audience.

Notwithstanding, when Friday evening came, he was as much on the tip-toe of expectation as the rest, and though pretending indifference, sorely disappointed because his mother said,—

‘Bertie, it is after nine, and the doctor is particular about your being in bed early ; so you had better go now. Your cousin will not be here for another hour, I am sure, and will probably be tired ; you can see her in the morning.’

Upon this Bertie was of course obliged to bid good-night, and follow the two youngest girls out of the drawing-room.

When ten o'clock struck, Mary and Blanche listened anxiously for the sound of the carriage wheels; suddenly, Mary said,—

‘There they are;’ and a few moments later Colonel Stapeleton’s tall figure appeared at the drawing-room door, ushering in a lady wrapped in a long fur cloak.

‘Henrietta, I bring you your niece.’

‘She is heartily welcome,’ came in cordial accents from Mrs Stapeleton’s lips. It was not her way to discuss people much, therefore she had not joined one way or another in the general speculations about Gretchen von Herberstein but in her secret heart had resolved to be a mother to this young relation as long as she remained under her roof.

'You are very kind, and I am so glad to find myself here,' said the new arrival in fluent English, but rolling the r's somewhat. 'May I, Aunt Henrietta?' Gretchen raised her veil and stooped to kiss her aunt, who responded by a motherly embrace.

'Of course, you are one of my children for the present. Here are Mary and Blanche ready to make acquaintance with you.'

'I have long wished to know you,' said Gretchen, affectionately stretching out a well-shaped, dimpled hand from beneath her cloak.

The girls shook it in turn, each murmuring a scarcely audible,—

'How d'ye do?'

They felt very shy, and were consequently stiff. It was not an occasion on which country-bred girls were likely to shine.

Mrs Stapeleton came to the rescue,—

‘You must take off your cloak and hat, my dear. It is so warm in here. Mary will show you the way to your room. You will want some food after your long journey.’

Gretchen said she would only like some tea, and then followed Mary out of the drawing-room. They returned very quickly, Mary glad that her task was over, and Gretchen pleased to get back to her aunt’s sunny presence.

The room assigned to her was like all the bedrooms at the Croft, lofty, large, and ugly, solidly furnished, but not possessing one object whereon the eye would rest with pleasure. Gretchen, who had heard much from her mother about English comfort, had not been able to help making uncomplimentary mental comparisons between her new abode and her room at

home, with its blue silk quilt, lace-edged pillows, and many pretty knick-knacks.

Her readiness of tongue hopelessly forsook her, and she had found nothing to say to Mary, excepting,—

‘I like your English fires, they look so cheerful.’

‘Yes,’ had been the blunt reply, ‘your stoves must be horrid.’

Mrs Stapeleton would not allow her niece to stay chatting very long, saying she must need a night’s rest; but they talked a great deal, whilst Gretchen drank her tea, and told of the rough crossing she had, and how she thought English railway carriages very cold after foreign ones.

‘Then you see,’ she added, politely, ‘ours are mostly warmed with steam, which one can turn on to any degree; and I daresay your way is much wholesomer than the *dampf-heizung*, as we call it.’

When Gretchen had retired to her room, she was made the subject of some discussion in the drawing-room.

Colonel Stapeleton praised her manners, though he did not think her good-looking. Mary pronounced her very well dressed for a German.

Blanche said, with a quiet smile,—

‘I expect we shall get on together.’

She and Mary held various opinions about their cousin’s appearance, the latter thinking her almost pretty, whilst Blanche said she had not yet made up her mind.

Let the reader judge. She was rather under middle height, had dark hair, a fair skin, with a good deal more colour than Blanche, delicate, though not very regular features, large eyes like a dormouse, and rosy lips, which parted to show a row of dazzling white teeth. Her compatriots called her ‘*ein hübsches Mädchen*,’ thereby

meaning that her general appearance was decidedly attractive. Perhaps her chief charm lay in the gracious way in which she would both render and acknowledge any little service.

On being introduced to their cousin next morning, Florry and Daisy decided that they had been quite right in saying she would be nice, only that she rather outdid their expectations.

Bertie did not say much, which was a sign he felt his condemnation had been premature ; but, in the course of the day, he privately told Daisy, who, though they constantly sparred, was his confidante, that Gretchen was ‘awfully jolly for a foreigner,’ which praise his cousin had won by her excellent skating, the younger portion of the family having spent an hour before luncheon on a large pond, which visitors at the Croft politely called ‘the

lake.' On this occasion, Gretchen had shown herself thoroughly at home in the art of making figures of eight and doing 'outside edge.'

In a week's time she began to feel quite at her ease at the Croft, and her cousins, once they had conquered their shyness, appeared charming to her.

Gretchen had received a cosmopolitan education, and united the ease of a Frenchwoman to the enthusiasm of a German. She amused her relations by her eagerness to learn to do everything *à l'Anglaise*, and was equally frank in her admiration and her criticisms, though always managing to express the latter so pleasantly, that they gave no offence.

'People talk of German *hausfrauen* being so good,' she said to Blanche, when they had been discussing the relative merits of English and foreign life, 'yet in

most things, you English are far more practical than we are. Whilst we would still be talking and indulging in *schwärmerei* about some philanthropic scheme, you would have already carried it out. Then, your villagers interest me. The reverence with which they look up to the squire's family, how queer it is ; quite feudal. Your church, I think, is nicer than ours ; the services are brighter. Our black gowns look so dreary ; and the sermon is so long. Gellert makes a good hit at our preachers when he says, in one of his poems :—

*“ Nein der verstorbene Herr, der war ein and’rer Mann
Der Gottes Wort wie sich’s gebühret,
Bald griechisch bald Hebräisch aus-geführt,
Die Ketzer stattlich auschändiret
Und Kurz so schön schematisiret,
Dass er der Baueren Herz gerühret.”*

In short, Blanche, your nation is superior in several respects, and has many

virtues ; only, *meine Liebe*, it is just a little stiff and too thorough. I find it so fatiguing to be always so desperately in earnest.'

In spite of this assertion, Gretchen's natural amiability and strict training in politeness, made her ready to fall in with any plans proposed by her cousins. She would go for long country walks with them in wet weather, though unable to see the pleasure of tramping through muddy lanes ; she visited the cottagers frequently, and many an old woman praised the kindliness 'o' that ere yung leddie from foreign parts ;' she even learnt to play at lawn tennis to please Bertie, though her wild shots and continual 'faults,' caused her to be laughed at most unmercifully by Florry and Daisy.

Colonel Stapeleton proclaimed his conviction that she would ride well, because her mother had been an excellent horse-

woman in her younger days. Gretchen assured him her only performances in that line had been to ride a donkey at *land-parties*, got up at foreign watering-places ; but her uncle would take no refusal. It ended, therefore, in her consenting to mount ‘Comet,’ which she succeeded with some difficulty in doing ; however, before they had reached the lodge gates, the noble steed had rid himself of his burden, and deposited her unhurt on the turf.

Gretchen did not try riding again, though Bertie, who had taken upon himself the rather unnecessary office of her champion, told his younger sisters that she could not have been more plucky, if she had been an English girl.

What she looked on as a specially alarming ordeal, was returning the visit of the vicar’s wife. Not that she was afraid of the good lady’s criticisms, though

it might justly have been said of the latter that she was—

‘Of temper as envenomed as an asp ;
Censorious, and her every word a wasp.’

On the contrary, this rather amused the young German lady. What Gretchen really dreaded was the cold stateliness with which she was received, and the chilly touch of the fingers extended to meet her hand.

‘Brr, brr !’ she exclaimed, comically, on finding herself, after having passed through the trial, once more comfortably seated by the fire in her aunt’s morning-room, ‘I feel cold to my very bones. Oh, your English stiffness is *ganz grässlich*. People call us ceremonious ; it is true we make deeper bows and curtsies than you do ; yet we have far more ease in society. I assure you, dear Aunt Henrietta, I would rather have to be presented to a

whole sofa-full of *Frau Excellenzen* than call on any more English vicars' wives, if they are all like Mrs Brotherton.'

'Ah, but I am thankful to say they are not,' answered Mrs Stapeleton, a good deal amused; 'indeed, I may say ours is a rare specimen. If you met the Marley rector and his wife, I think you would begin to *schwärm̄en* for them at once. Their house is quite an ideal English parsonage, where good taste, tact, and neighbourly love reign supreme.'

Mrs Stapeleton had grown very fond of Gretchen; she liked her warm-heartedness, and admired the graceful way in which she expressed her gratitude for any kindness shown her—sometimes saying to her own girls,—'We are a long way behind Germans, French people, or, indeed, any foreigners in the art of saying "thank you" prettily.'

Yet, whilst pointing out Gretchen's attractions, she fully saw that her niece's education had been superficial in some respects, especially lacking the self-training which her lively disposition needed ; for Gretchen acted almost entirely from impulse. Like all high-spirited people, she occasionally suffered from great depression ; then she would mope, and throwing her arms round Blanche's neck, say,—

'Ich habe doch Heimweh.'

Like many Germans, she took an intense interest in English home life, especially as led in the country.

'Das ist doch ganz anders wie bei uns,' she would remark, in her long talks with her aunt. 'It is just what I have read of in English novels, and always dreamed of seeing some day. Ladies and gentlemen meet on such a different footing from what they do abroad. Then,

you have such simple names for grand things. What we would call a palace, you call a house; and what would be considered a park in Germany, you look on as a flower-garden, or almost as a flower-pot. One of our royal dukes would not have a finer place than Marley. And what I like best is, that there is as much comfort behind the scenes as in the reception-rooms. *Maman* is accustomed to English ways, and so we have pretty rooms, though furnished more in French style; but in many a German *schloss*, you would find sleeping-rooms at which your maid would turn up her nose. Still, Aunt Henrietta, there is one custom I wish your nation would give up.'

'What is that, Gretchen?'

'Oh, that dreadful fashion of the ladies leaving the dinner-table before the gentlemen. Abroad, even if the gentlemen do

go off to smoke afterwards, still, whoever has taken you into dinner, takes you out again ; and that is so nice. In this country, I always feel so *gênée* at having to go out alone. When I see one lady after another leaving the dining-room, I cannot help repeating to myself the old French rhyme,—

*“Quand les poules vont aux champs,
La plus belle va devant,
La seconde suit la première
Et la troisième va la toute dernière.”*

There is something so comical to me in the sight.'

Mrs Marley had been very gracious in her reception of the young Countess Herberstein, and had 'lionised' her at the Priory to the latter's entire satisfaction. There was so much to admire there ; the chapel, with its old stained windows, through which the sun shed its rays in various hues on the marble monuments of long departed

priors ; then the monuments themselves, with their almost effaced inscriptions, recording the many virtues of those who lay entombed there ; and whose effigies, whatever their lives might have been, represented them, for the most part, with hands devoutly crossed upon their breasts, and saintly smiles upon their placid faces. In the Priory itself, there was room upon room hung with faded tapestry, of which more than one possessed sliding panels dexterously concealed within its walls, by means of which traitors had escaped in olden times, or some midnight assassin had entered to steep his dagger in the blood of an unwary victim.

There were many strange traditions connected with the house, '*ganz gruselig*', as Gretchen, half in terror, half in delight, declared them to be. Like not a few of her compatriots, she was rather super-

stitious, though a bit of a sceptic. Why is it that those who are most incredulous about what they cannot see, are most alarmed at anything they cannot account for ?

Besides the house at Marley, there were the terraces overshadowed by huge elms, where the grass was exquisitely green, and the rooks cawed vociferously ; and tastefully laid out grounds, not quite destitute of flowers, though it was still so early in the year ; hot-houses filled with rare plants ; and above all, that most thoroughly English sight, a magnificent park, such as no visitor to our shores can help admiring, where the deer roamed freely about, and which was beautiful even at that season, though its grand old trees were stripped of the rich foliage which was their glory in summer time.

Squire Marley, in spite of his hatred

of foreigners in the abstract, showed himself genial as ever in the presence of the attractive young Countess Herberstein, and she was quite willing to *schwärm̄en* for this *beau idéal* of an English country gentleman, with his venerable white locks and cordial manner.

She could not help proving a favourite with all who came in contact with her, on account of her contentment with all arrangements made for herself, and her readiness to be helpful to those around her. Nothing pleased her better than to fancy she could be of service to some one. Mrs Stapeleton, when watching her, often thought of the description of Goethe's Dorothea.

‘ Genügsam
*Scheint das Mädchen und thätig, und so gehört
ihr die Welt an.*’

Gretchen took turns with her cousins

in reading to her aunt, they being glad to yield any French or German literature to her, and her hearer gaining, of course, considerably, by the exchange.

Miss Davis, too, was not the least devoted to her amongst the various members of the Croft household, just because she could be thoroughly gracious without seeming or wishing to be patronising. She had been brought up to value mental gifts and learning, and could talk well, even though her knowledge of a subject might often not be very profound. She won Miss Davis's heart by avoiding the not unfrequent mistake of thinking governesses could talk of nothing but education, and discussed foreign literature with her, lending her some good periodicals and novels.

Being a German, it seems almost needless to say that she loved music ; added to that, she could play and sing well. Her

playing was correct, if not brilliant ; and she could render a sonata of Beethoven's, or an *étude* of Heller's, in a way to satisfy the master of one of her national *conservatoires*. Her voice was truly German, rich and powerful, well suited to Schubert's *Wanderer* or *Am Meer*; a treat to real lovers of music, but hardly calculated to take in general society.

Such was the foreign cousin, who had come on a long visit to the Croft.

Blanche was particularly glad to have her ; for Mary had not proved very companionable of late. Though not unpossessed of good qualities, and an energetic worker for the good of the parish, she was naturally moody, and a love-affair with one of Mr Brotherton's curates, which had met with much opposition from her father, did not tend just then to improve her temper.

Having some one in her stead to share amusements and occupations with, made the time till Herbert's return hang less heavily on Blanche's hands, and left fewer hours for indulging in misgivings. In short, being of a trustful, cheerful nature, her spirits rose in course of time, and she began to look forward to Easter almost without apprehensions.





CHAPTER VI.

CONFICTING INFLUENCES.

THAT was true. A great revolution was taking place in Herbert's thoughts. His earnest mind was struggling after the light, but as yet it was encompassed by clouds and mist.

What was the cause of this ?

Perhaps mental growth.

Where was the blame for the upheaving of his faith to be laid ?

Some might put it down to ritualism, the pomp and pageantry of which, once the first enthusiasm had cooled, had

brought on, as a necessary result, a hatred of the hollow sham of mere outward observance, unaccompanied by corresponding inward devotion, ending in utter faithlessness.

This, however, would be unreasonable. It was not the fault of any system which had produced this reaction, but of the speculative, unpractical character which had hitherto belonged to Herbert's ideas on religion. Love of beauty in all things, sight, forms, sounds, and a natural bent towards theorising, had been the sum of his devotion.

Suddenly the awakening had come.

It needed but the accidental—or will it be liable to misconstruction to say the *providential*?—taking up of a book of pessimistic philosophy, to rouse him from his dreamings, and show him that he was, in fact, creedless.

At first he could not realise that this was indeed true, grew impatient with himself, and tried to make up for his inward deadness by increased zeal in argument. In such a mood, he had answered Blanche on that January afternoon at the Priory.

Tossed to and fro like a boat cut adrift from its moorings, he had gone, just before Blanche's return from abroad, to stay with his cousin Cyril. It was not unnatural that the quiet, out-of-the-world calm which pervaded the cloisters of the theological college should have had its temptations for him.

There had not yet come to him the quiet-bringing knowledge that only the vessel on board of which is the Prince of Peace, can receive a 'Peace, be still,' spoken with power, regardless of time or place—even, indeed, when it is the sport

of the angry waters of the stormiest lake.

As it was, he thought it very blissful to give up all the vanities and pride of life to seek rest in such a haven as Saint Leo's, if only this would infallibly bring the longed-for balm to his troubled spirit.

Monsignor Marley's soul had once cleaved to his cousin Richard's, like that of David to Jonathan; but now the church of his adoption filled the first place in his heart, and he would have had no scruples in making a proselyte of the squire's heir. Gladly would he have hailed the day when Latin chants should again resound in Marley Priory, and its walls be filled with wreaths of incense; and in hopes of accomplishing this, he was content to wait patiently, though, at the same time, constantly

watching that no opportunity should pass by unused, in which he might sow such seed as would promise a future harvest according to his desires.

Himself a proselyte, he knew well how to deal with those whom he wished to bring under the Roman obedience, and was well aware what influences to effect that end, it was needful to bring to bear on different characters and frames of mind, and the most judicious times for employing them. His efforts had almost invariably been crowned with success, and he was looked upon by his ecclesiastical superiors as a valuable instrument for drawing big fish—that is to say, those great in genius, worldly position, or wealth—into the net of Saint Peter.

To win over the promising heir to the head of his own family would, he felt, put the crown on all his former achievements.

He had always hoped to do this when Herbert came to man's estate, and the poetical, brooding temperament of his young cousin seemed likely to further his schemes. This fact fully made up to him for the estrangement brought about by his own change of religion between himself and Richard Marley, and for the matter-of-fact, John Bull type of the latter's character, which had made him feel from the first that to try to make a convert of the squire was as hopeless a task, as any set to ill-fated spirits in the Tartarean realms.

On the occasion of this January visit, his keen eye soon detected that there was something amiss with Herbert ; but to dissemble and pretend to take the latter's counterfeit unconcern for real coin, was no hard undertaking for one so well trained in craftiness.

Here was the first step already gained. Herbert's vanity was flattered, as was natural in so young a man, to think that this quick-sighted monsignor perceived no change in him.

The next step had been to let the learned tranquillity of Saint Leo's College do its work in preparing the soil further for the reception of the tenets taught within its walls. Therefore, Cyril Marley willed that his cousin and guest should be impressed with the fact that simplicity and straightforwardness reigned there, and believe that its inmates, while going on steadily in their own course, had no designs of disturbing the faith of others.

To this end, the monsignor invited those among the clerical staff to his table, who would lend themselves best to giving the conversation a seemingly liberal tone, and by his own example

encouraged them in displaying a knowledge of the world and of society. He saw quickly that Herbert's eyes had been satiated with ornate services ; and that incense, lights, vestments, and the accompanying ceremonial were becoming distasteful to him ; therefore he knew that grand functions such as had paved the Romeward way for many of his spiritual children, were to be avoided in this case.

If he invited his cousin to be present at any religious services, it was when some simple litany was being recited without any display by a few earnest worshippers ; or when in the twilight the skilful playing of the college organist, filling the otherwise empty chapel, was likely to lend itself to the awakening of yearnings after peace in a mind filled with perplexing thoughts.

'Feeble at best is my endeavour,
I see, but cannot reach the height
That lies for ever in the light :
And yet for ever and for ever,
What seeming just within my grasp,
I feel my feeble hand unclasp,
And sink discouraged into night.'

These words of the lamented American poet's, often came into Herbert's mind during the visit to Saint Leo's; those days of doubts, longings, and vacillation. His father seldom met their cousin Cyril; even the old love for the friend of his boyhood, which nothing could drive out utterly from his warm heart, was unable to make the society of a Roman priest congenial to the squire. He hated the whole papal system, with the wholesale, unreasoning, and, in part at least, unreasonable vehemence that was common to most country gentlemen in his own father's time. It was, therefore, an undeniable proof of the depth of his

personal attachment to the monsignor, that he did not break with him altogether, and allowed his son, though not over willingly, to go to Saint Leo's. His only stipulation had been that Herbert's visits there should be few and far between, and was secretly glad when each came safely to an end.

As there was no immediate prospect of hunting, in consequence of a hard frost, when Herbert had announced his intention of accepting an invitation to Saint Leo's, and as he was not in the least aware of his son's state of mind, Richard Marley had not received the announcement with more dissatisfaction than usual.

And why had Herbert accepted the monsignor's invitation? He must have known that he was running his head into a noose in putting himself within reach

of Cyril's influence whilst his mind was in such an unsettled state. Well, as regards that, he thought he went with his eyes open. If the doctrines of the English Church were too rigid for him, it seemed to him impossible that the most artful wiles, the most cleverly-put arguments jesuitical cunning could devise, should incline him for one moment to bend his neck to the imperious demands made on men's minds and consciences by Rome.

And then, to go to Saint Leo's was a tempting way of killing time till Blanche's return from the Continent. He looked forward with pleasure to sojourning at the priestly seminary, where he could hold converse with a man of the monsignor's intellectual capacities, instead of making a daily round of the Marley property with his father, who required his full

attention when holding forth on the preservation of game, the value of crops, rights of road, irrigation, or the delinquencies of poachers.

If all this is taken into consideration, it is not to be wondered at that, after three days spent under his cousin Cyril's roof, all thoughts of the possibility of his host's attempting to make a proselyte of him should have vanished from his mind; while, on the other hand, the advantage of having once for all renounced all right of private judgment, and having placed the keeping of one's conscience in the hands of an infallible Church, had suggested themselves to him in a very pleasant light.

This change in his thoughts the monsignor was not slow either to perceive or to try to turn to good account. Still avoiding all arguments on dogmas, he

led the conversation into channels calculated to show how mistaken a notion it was to suppose the Roman Church demanded a slavish sacrifice of the intellectual gifts of her children, pointing out what great orators, thinkers, painters, and musicians she numbered from time to time amongst her most loyal adherents.

The bait was taken.

To give up 'foolish questionings,' and simply obey, in matters of belief, would not be so very hard, Herbert thought. The faith of highly-educated, enlightened Roman Catholics, of such men as people of all parties and creeds alike respected for their genius, was surely quite another thing to the grovelling superstitions of some of her peasant-born priests in obscure Italian villages or Connemara mud-cabins. It did not occur to him that if this were so, no further con-

demnation of the system was needed ; for surely Truth should be the common property of all. It cannot be dangerous, or need the support of a superstructure of falsehoods.

He, however, did not reason thus, but went on to say to himself that while the mind was at rest on greater questions, a man could be all the more at liberty to dedicate his powers to the Church's glory. It would be so peaceful to pour out his soul in holy contemplation far from the strife of men's embittered tongues, and the spirit of hatred engendered of conflicting parties ; and perhaps light upon some gems of meditation, worthy to be handed down to future generations, bringing refreshment to other heavy-laden souls, weary with the world's conflict. Yes, every talent could be thus gloriously consecrated. The monk who, on his

knees, with much prayer, had painted the Madonna and Christ, had left behind him representations, whose wonderful purity had been a legacy of mercy to thousands, who had since gazed on them.

And then how could music, that divinest of gifts,—how could it be more fitly used than in enhancing the splendour of those great acts of worship when the Church, prostrate in adoration, joins her praises to those of the angelic choirs, and it almost seems as if the veil were momentarily lifted, that the toilers on earth may have a foretaste of the harmonies of heaven?

Thoughts like these suggested themselves in dreamy sweetness to Herbert, as he sat one day at the window of his cousin's study, gazing out into the quiet cloisters, where two darkly-clad priests, with pale, ascetic-looking countenances,

were pacing to and fro, intent on their breviaries.

He might have continued long in this attitude of mind and body, dreaming on, wrapped in the contemplation of the beauties, and not detecting the fallacies of his line of thought, unconscious how much his mind had dwelt for the last four-and-twenty hours on the preferability of a life of which celibacy was a necessary condition, although his solemn troth had been plighted to a woman for better for worse. But he was aroused from his musings, and this by nothing less prosaic than the arrival of the post.

A servant entered, and brought him a letter.

It was from his mother, and contained an enclosure from Blanche, written from Nice, to announce her homeward journey.

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"If you come home on Tuesday by
the 12.30, Blanche will call for you
at the station on her way home."

So ran Mrs. Weston's letter, and it
produced a very similar picture in
Herbert's mind. Women of olden
days and maidens with maidens in
his mental sight, giving way to a more
modern picture of an English girl in a
neat hat and dinner, as when he had
bidden farewell at the Victoria Station
in the previous October.

The result was that Herbert sent his
signor, who ensured the early departure
of the train; that he then
wished for his coat, and that he
leave Saint Louis the following morning.
The monsignor of course remonstrated
at this sudden departure, but it was in
his line of policy to seem friendly and
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'If you come home on Tuesday by the 12.30, Blanche will call for you at the station on her way here.'

So ran Mrs Marley's letter; and it produced a very sudden revolution in Herbert's ideas. Visions of medieval saints and monkish cells vanished from his mental sight, giving way to a quite modern picture of an English girl, in a neat hat and ulster, to whom he had bidden farewell at the Victoria Station in the previous October.

The result was that he told the monsignor, who entered the study shortly after the arrival of the letter, that his mother wished for his return, and that he must leave Saint Leo's the following morning. The monsignor of course expressed regret at this sudden departure, but it was not in his line of policy to seem desirous of pressing his cousin to remain; and Herbert

decided to leave next day by an early train.

On reaching the small road-side station which was nearest Saint Leo's, he found the train was already there, and hurriedly entered a compartment in which two other gentlemen were seated. His fellow-travellers proved to be two Oxford acquaintances—persons better known for the liberality than the orthodoxy of their opinions. One was a really deep thinker; the other flippant, fond of argument, and of playing with speculative theories—clever, but undoubtedly shallow.

'You are come from Saint Leo's, I suppose, Marley?' the last-mentioned individual remarked, after exchanging greetings with Herbert. 'I don't know,' he added, 'where else one could go to from Fourbridges station, excepting to that abode of sanctity and learning.'

‘Yes ; I have been to see my father’s cousin, the monsignor,’ Herbert answered rather shyly.

He knew he must be prepared to be the butt for sundry witticisms, even if he succeeded in keeping out of an argument.

‘I thought there was an extra odour of sanctity about you,’ was Leslie Stephenson’s next remark. ‘How horrified the monsignor would be if he knew that, after scarcely having left the sheltering bosom of Mother Church, you had “fallen amongst thieves,” or rather reprobates like Morton and myself.’

Herbert only smiled ; generally he was ready with an answer for Stephenson. His merciless adversary at once perceived his advantage, and, bent on indulging his love of teasing, said,—

‘Come, Morton, let us give Marley an antidote. It is evidently a very bad case;

he has drunk deeply of the spirit of Saint Leo's ;' and taking up a book which lay with his companion's rugs, he presented it to Herbert, who, glad to shelter himself from further attacks, accepted it, and said, laughing,—

‘Now a few flashes of silence, if you please, that the antidote may have time for working.’

‘That is right !’ exclaimed Stephenson. ‘Read it carefully. It is a splendid book ; fifty times better than Schopenhauer.’

‘Schopenhauer was an egotist,’ put in Morton, gravely. ‘No man’s theories can have much weight with me if I see no corresponding effect in his life.’

It was the first time, Mr Morton had seemed disposed to join in the conversation ; not that his views made him sympathise in the least with what he believed to be Herbert’s, but because he was so much

in earnest about his own opinions that Stephenson's flippancy often grated on him, as much as if he had been the most zealous churchman.

The book which had been placed in Herbert's hands was a collection of essays, intended to set forth the superiority of free-thinking over the belief in a revealed religion. So far, it was similar to many pamphlets and works of the age; in one respect it differed from many. It contained no bitter invectives, no cheap satire. The style was grave and terse; the arguments were plausible; it spoke respectfully of those who held to what the author, nevertheless, regarded as obsolete superstitions.

To accept the succeeding links in the chain of reasoning, would have been possible for anyone, who could get over the first objection to the deification of hu-

manity taking the place of what countless generations have been taught to know as the First and Great Commandment ; and allowing that the idea of living again only in ‘the hearts and minds of others’ is, necessarily a nobler creed, than the hope of immortality, as it has been held by the greatest and best of the human race throughout past ages.

This work was not without its effect upon Herbert.

By the time the train had reached a junction where Messrs Morton and Stephenson were to change carriages, he had become thoroughly interested in it, and put down the name in his pocket-book. The author, as he had seen by a short biographical notice, which formed the introduction to the book, had lately passed away ; gone, let it be hoped, to receive of the Father of Lights a full revelation

of that truth after which his whole mind had striven, though erringly, whilst here ; gone, where no will-o'-the-wisp of men's false teaching could mislead him, but where He in Whom is no darkness at all, should cause the scales to drop from his eyes, that he might learn that perfection is centred in Christ, the Light of the World.

Herbert learnt, from the lines traced concerning this writer by a friend's hand, that he had led a singularly consistent, manly life, according to his understanding of things, a fact on which the biographer dwelt as an illustration of the high standard of morality of agnostics ; and this—for example is always more influential than precept—carried great weight with Herbert, who hitherto knew of no rule of conduct at all equal to it amongst those inclining that school of thought, whose works had come under his notice.

Another man, in a less unsettled state of mind, might have seen in it an assurance of the truth, that the Divine Spirit strives in all seekers after light, even though they know or acknowledge Him not.

But, to speak of the leave-taking with Mr Morton and his companion. As Herbert returned the book to its owner, he said, with would-be carelessness,—

‘Thank you, I am quite cured.’

Stephenson thought it a capital joke; that was all. But Mr Morton, a keener observer, had noticed the absorption with which Herbert had perused the little volume, and made a mental note of it. He saw in this clever, enthusiastic young fellow a possible disciple, and one whose mental powers, position, and wealth might prove very useful.

Leslie Stephenson, the son of a rich iron-master, was a quick-witted young

man, who had merely taken a passing fancy for airing sceptical opinions, and might as likely as not, when a few years older and considerably humbler, be ready to return to safer ways.

George Morton was different. He was an author of some repute, editor of a magazine for the airing of heretical opinions, a platform speaker; in short, a man who lived by his wits. He got on because he was in earnest, and perhaps because, in his way, he was as unscrupulous and zealous in seeking to make converts to his views, as Monsignor Marley was on the behalf of Rome. As it happened, the shaft shot at random by Leslie Stephenson wrangled in Herbert's perturbed mind, and on his return to Oxford, he fell an easy prey to Mr Morton's efforts to make an ally of him.

That shrewd man knew that if left to

chance, they might be months in Oxford at the same time without meeting; for their ways did not naturally converge. It had also been his experience to find himself favoured by fortune, when hazarding a bold stroke. So he decided to clench the matter by making a very bold one in this case; it was to write to Herbert, requesting him to take part in a series of papers to be carried on in the magazine of which he, Morton, was the editor. The subject was to be the consideration of whether free discussion in religion was more attended with benefits or the reverse. The letter was carefully worded, and made it appear as if Herbert would confer a great favour on the writer by consenting to the proposition. Mr Morton was wise, also, in his choice of a subject, for it seemed a safe one to Herbert, who, in a little while, duly sent in a contribution,

which was, of course, accepted and published in the magazine. His only stipulation was that he might, for a while at least, use a *nom de plume*.

This preliminary step having been taken, the rest was not difficult. He soon let himself in for more than he had at first intended, found his remarks were quoted in support of decidedly free-thinking theories, and took to writing long letters in the correspondence column of the magazine, first in self-defence, then less cautiously, fearing he would be accused of not possessing the courage of his opinions.

In short, though he still retained his feigned signature, reports as to who really was the author of many of the most powerful and plain-spoken papers and letters in 'Veritas' soon got about in certain circles, and he gained the reputation of being a very unorthodox undergraduate.

This was enough to satisfy Mr Morton for the time being ; he did not wish to drive matters too far, till Herbert had taken his degree ; after that, he hoped to gain him entirely for his cause, get him to make his *début* as a platform speaker, and, perhaps, induce him to undertake the sub-editorship of a still more advanced magazine than ‘Veritas,’ entitled, ‘Plain Truths for the People.’

As to Herbert, he was interested for the moment, and thought his mind getting settled, just because throwing himself into this new work gave him less time for doubts. Concerning the fair hopes of future usefulness built up for him in Mr Morton’s imagination, he of course knew nothing, and for himself he really had not decided whether to devote himself permanently to such occupations or not. He lived in the present. When the thought

of Blanche came to him in connection with the new line he had taken up, it certainly gave him some misgivings. He feared she would be startled at it; care far more, indeed, than about any of his former ritualistic enthusiasms. Ought he not to tell her? Ah! there came in the tempter. Why give her, perhaps, unnecessary pain? He was, certainly, much interested in the new field for speculation lately opened out to him; but had not by any means finally decided how much weight the notions of Mr Morton and all the 'Veritas' school should ultimately have with him. Let him wait till he had quite made up his mind ere he spoke to his betrothed on the subject, at any rate, there would be time enough to do so when he paid his next visit to the Croft.

When the volume of Schopenhauer was returned to him, he hesitated. Had

Blanche, after all, any suspicions of the revolution which had taken place in his opinions? Surely not, or she, who was always so outspoken, would have said something more, besides remarking that Bertie had brought the book to her, saying Herbert must have left it behind when he had last stayed with them.

And then—for like all people who are fighting against the promptings of conscience—Herbert desired to heap up as many arguments as possible in proof of his being right, a temporary concealment mattered little, when Blanche would be sure in the end to think with him, and see that it was the cause of truth he was contesting for, even as he himself, once it had been put before him, had seen necessary to change his opinions.

Of course, no news of this reached either Marley or the Croft, if in mention-

ing the latter we except such information as Captain Crawfurd had communicated to Blanche on the night of Lord Knowles-worth's ball. Equally, of course, that talkative dragoon's account was highly coloured; for though writing constantly for 'Veritas,' and being pointed out by many undergraduates to their friends as the supposed author of the papers, which had indeed come from his pen, he had never openly announced his theories, or even communicated them to any persons, excepting such as were connected with the staff of the periodical to which he contributed.





CHAPTER VII.

HIGH ART LADIES.

THE week before Easter had come, and Blanche was not the only person at the Croft who wondered why Herbert had not written to fix the day of his arrival. Mrs Stapeleton also having been made the confidante of her daughter's anxieties, began to look eagerly forward to the post's bringing news from Oxford.

It was the middle of Holy Week, and Dick, the eldest boy, was already home from Eton, which caused the colonel to remark,—

'I am surprised we have not heard from Herbert yet. I expected he would be here before Dick. Surely he cannot be waiting for a written invitation after the one I gave him at Marley, in January. Well, it will do no harm to write and remind him.' And he did so.

An answer came by return of post. Herbert was sorry, but he found it impossible to be at the Croft for Easter-day. He should probably be at home on Easter Monday, and the next Wednesday, at latest, should see him with the Stapeletons.

'H'm,' was the colonel's only comment, as he read this letter, and handed it across the breakfast-table to Blanche; but his family, being accustomed to his ways, at once expected what indeed followed, namely, that he would be more pompous and frigid than usual for the next few days.

Colonel Stapeleton was a man who could be ‘odiously polite,’ that was his way of making those around him feel his displeasure, if his will was crossed in anything.

His mind was, just then, set on Blanche’s marriage with Herbert, because their combined fortunes, and the heir to Marley Priory’s hereditary position in the county, made the match seem most desirable in a worldly point of view, which was the only one in which he was in the habit of looking at things.

Easter was not all it sometimes was to Blanche, though the beauties of early spring and fine weather made it seem outwardly a joyous time. Her father, who began to fancy something in her conduct must have caused this change in Herbert’s plans, continued so stiff and cold in his manner, especially to her, that the har-

mony of the home-circle suffered, and then the old anxiety about her betrothed had again awoke in her heart, and forebodings of possible sorrow disturbed her peace.

Dick Stapeleton, like his younger brother, was spoilt, though not so much. Eton had improved him, and he was not such a favourite with his father; still he expected a good deal to be done for his amusement, whenever he came home, and had returned at Easter with the full intention of enjoying his holidays. The state of things, which he found at the Croft, put him out. Blanche, his great ally, was 'not half so jolly as usual,' so he said to himself; and that made all the difference. To make matters worse, he did not take to his cousin Gretchen at all, perhaps partly in opposition to Bertie, who lauded her to the skies.

The weather was so warm, that his

mother was able to be carried almost daily to her ‘bower,’ where the whole of the home-party spent a portion of the holiday mornings with her. She said it made a capital match to the frescoes on the walls and ceiling to see so many young faces looking out at her from amongst the plants and flowers. On that particular Wednesday after Easter, on which Herbert had said he fully expected to arrive at the Croft, the family, with the exception of Colonel Stapeleton, whom, to their relief, business had taken to the neighbouring town, were one and all assembled in the ‘bower;’ but, perhaps, on account of no further message having come from the Priory, they seemed less bright than usual.

Florry and Daisy, taking their cue from

Dick, were subdued, because he seemed gloomy.

Mary was knitting her brows over a spray of orange-blossom to be worked in crewels, doing few stitches, and thinking many thoughts about the various obstacles which would need to be cleared away ere she should have got to the happy stage when such a wreath should be placed on her head, and she should be united to the curate.

Blanche was seated by her mother's couch, dreamily playing with the tassel of a cushion, which was not the sort of occupation in which she often indulged. In short, conversation would probably have flagged but for Bertie and Gretchen, who were entertaining Mrs Stapeleton with an account of a recent expedition to the Croft

sheepwashes, when the mischievous boy had persuaded his cousin that it was quite necessary for ladies in England to be able to jump a ditch, whereupon Gretchen had said,—

‘Oh, yes, that is what you call “*le sport*,” or “*le steeplechase*;” but I did not know it was for ladies.’ Finally, however, in her anxiety to identify herself with the customs of the country of her sojourn, she had, as she expressed it, ‘taken her courage in both hands,’ and consented to attempt to jump a broad, muddy spot, whence she emerged bespattered from head to foot with dirt, just as the prim wife of the rector swept through a gate hard by, which lead by a short cut to her own house.

The struggle between politeness and

disgust on the good lady's face, Gretchen said she *never* could forget.

'Gretchen and Bertie seem to have managed to amuse themselves ; but I call it horribly slow here,' Dick growled to Florry.

'Nonsense, Dick,' put in Blanche, who had overheard the remark. 'Why don't you play tennis, instead of grumbling ?'

'Tennis ? I should like lots of tennis, but there is nobody to play,' was the surly response. 'You said you couldn't find time yesterday, and Mary and Daisy are no good.'

'What is that, Dick ?' asked Mrs Stapeleton, who was determined to do what she could to dispel the dejection, which she noticed had taken possession of the little circle, having an old-fashioned

notion that young people should look as if they found life a very pleasant thing in holiday-time. ‘Have you no one to play tennis? Well, you shall have some one this afternoon; for I have asked Mrs Rice and Miss Witherley to come. They prefer that to coming this evening —Mrs Rice does not like going out at night.’

‘Oh, bother,’ was the ungrateful rejoinder. ‘I can’t stand high art tennis.’

‘What do you mean, Dick?’ asked Gretchen. ‘I am always hearing this phrase “high art,” and cannot understand it. Then who are Mrs Rice and Miss Witherley?’

‘I will answer your last question first, Gretchen. They are high art ladies.’

‘There it is again. How droll an

expression! and why have I not heard of these ladies before? I know the names of most of your neighbours.'

'They have been in London till now, where, I suppose, they have been going in for further artistic studies, or buying dowdy stuffs for hangings for their rooms or drapery for themselves. I don't suppose they would condescend to talk of curtains and dresses like we do. Such expressions would be far too modern.'

'You need not believe all Dick says, Gretchen,' put in Mary, noticing her cousin's puzzled expression.

'No, that is *stuff*, too, though it may not be high art,' said Bertie. 'Mrs Rice is a widow—not at all bad fun—and Miss Witherley is younger and lives

with her, about a mile and a-half from here.'

'Bertie forgot,' put in Dick, 'to add that they have a queerly-furnished house, all grown over with creepers, which used to be called Woodbine Cottage; but when Mrs Rice bought it, she changed the name to "The Portal." What that means nobody knows; unless it is intended to convey that when you set foot on the threshold, you enter the gate of the temple of art.'

'Gammon!' said the indignant Bertie. 'It is a much more uncommon name than Woodbine Cottage, which sounds like a lodging-house. Inside, too, it is very pretty, and the drawing-room is the best arranged in the neighbourhood. In short, people only laugh at Mrs Rice

and Miss Witherley because they have more taste than themselves and are *ascetic*.'

This last remark of Bertie's, delivered with oracular solemnity, was received by a burst of laughter from the family in general, his mother joining in as heartily as the rest.

'That's right, Bertie, stick up for your friends, and never mind if you do use the wrong word sometimes,' was Dick's teasing rejoinder. 'The fact is, Gretchen,' he went on, turning to his cousin, 'these ladies flatter Bertie to any amount, till he thinks himself no end of a swell and judge of "combinations of colour." That is one of their pet phrases, and a great deal more of that sort of humbug.'

‘ Still,’ said Gretchen, ‘ I am more puzzled than ever as to what high art may be.’

‘ It is a preference for subdued tints to glaring colours, the harmonising of different tones—sage, for instance, and—’ Bertie began, sententiously ; but was thrown out of countenance by Dick’s putting in, with mock gravity,—

‘ And *onions* ; they always go together. Really, Bertie, the picture you are beginning to draw is enough to bring the tears to one’s eyes.’

‘ Oh, shut up, Dick—do !’ came from Bertie, who could not stand much teasing.

‘ I think, boys, we have had enough of this subject for the present,’ said Mrs Stapeleton ; ‘ for between you two your

cousin will only get more puzzled than ever. We will talk about it another time, Gretchen, when these troublesome lads are out of the way. As to the fashionable rage for high art, all I will now tell you is that there has been a reaction from the ugliness in dress and house decoration which contented a former generation, but like in all such movements, a goodly number amongst its devotees carry the new idea to ludicrous extremes. I think Mrs Rice comes under that heading when she wants the schoolchildren to have blue frocks and green pinafores, because blue and green are so often mingled in nature; and Miss Witherley did the same when she insisted on old Nanny Wood, who is bedridden, having a quilt of the hue of

brick-dust, "because the popular taste must be educated;" though the poor old woman said she did "loike summat wi' a bit o' colour" to brighten up her cottage.'





CHAPTER VIII.

D I V I D E D.

MRS RICE and Miss Witherley came early in the afternoon ; and their attire was a further revelation to Gretchen on the subject of high art.

Mrs Rice had been handsome, but was already rather worn-looking. She was nearer forty than thirty ; and when her husband was alive, and before she had taken to æsthetic pleasures, had lived

in a constant whirl of gaieties — going from the Brighton season to London, finishing up with some fashionable foreign watering-place, only to begin the same round again as year followed year.

She had good features and a fine figure, which allowed of her indulging in greater eccentricities in dress than most women could have stood.

Her long, flowing robe, which she did not shorten even to play tennis, but which she managed with commendable skill, was brick-coloured, and devoid of trimming ; at the waist it was encircled with a girdle of the same colour, on which were traced Egyptian figures, such as one sees on Neapolitan pottery. A salmon-coloured handkerchief round her neck was the

only addition to her attire which she permitted herself.

To describe the way in which her hair was done would be no easy matter; the best way of conveying an idea of its appearance to the reader, to whom it has not been permitted to gaze with the bodily eye on that wonderful structure, is to say that it *looked* as if it had not been done at all. This result was to be ascribed—first, to its natural fuzziness, and secondly, to the extreme simplicity with which she wished it to be arranged.

Miss Witherley's dress was also uncommon, but different. One of the advantages possessed by earnest disciples of æstheticism seems to be the latitude allowed them for the display of individual taste, so that those held to be connoisseurs

may wear, with an increased reputation for knowledge of the beautiful, what humbler mortals would feel shy of arraying themselves in.

Of Miss Witherley's costume, it would be hopeless for the ordinary story-writer to attempt to give a faithful description. It might have fairly puzzled a Worth to find the right terms.

Let it suffice to say that sage and old gold were the colours in which she was clothed; her hat, which was shady, but of no particular shape, being entirely covered with old gold satin, and ornamented with a drooping garland of flowers, of a kind which I have not recognised as being figured in any botanical work, that has so far come under my notice.

She did not affect the classically simple

drapery of her friend, but indulged in at least as many trimmings and furbelows, as other people ; yet her general appearance suggested the thought that she was not really a child of the prosaic nineteenth century, but had just stepped out of some old painting ; only there was so much that was essentially and entirely ‘ Miss Witherley,’ about her, that it would have been difficult to ascribe a date to the picture.

The most sensible article worn by Mrs Rice was, also, her hat, which was large and shaded her eyes.

‘ Don’t let us lose any time. You can discuss that new dessert set at tea-time, Mary,’ said Dick, fearing there could be but little tennis, even of the high art sort which he affected to despise, if Mrs Rice went into further descriptions of the unique

Minghetti plates she had seen in London, at the house of a friend, just returned from abroad.

'Very well, let us to business, impatient youth,' said Mrs Rice, good-humouredly ; she liked tennis, and considered it a much more graceful game than croquet, for she said the player could *pose* to much greater advantage. It may be said, too, that considering her long train, she did not play badly.

Gretchen von Herberstein had watched the new-comers with a good deal of secret curiosity, making mental notes to enrich her next letter to her mother, on the wonderful fancies of those *bizarre* English people.

She was politely asked to join them at tennis ; but knowing her own inabilities,

declined, preferring to make up a set with Daisy, Bertie, and the curate's sister, who had come to call with her brother; Mary and he declaring they preferred looking on. Miss Witherley and Dick against Blanche, handicapped by Mrs Rice and her train, were well matched; and they played on steadily for more than an hour, each having won even sets. The game which was to decide the conquest was a desperate struggle. Dick was serving to Blanche, and there were eager shouts of 'forty, thirty, deuce, deuce again.'

Just as Blanche was hoping to make the final stroke, which was to give her side the victory, a big colley dog bounded towards her from the further side of the lawn, wagging his tail and barking joyously.

‘Down, down!’ cried Dick.

‘Down!’ cried Blanche herself; but it was of no use. The dog’s vehement demonstrations of affection had spoilt her stroke.

A shrill whistle called him off, and at the same moment Dick cried,—

‘Game!’

‘Oh dear, that tiresome dog. We ought to have had it, indeed we ought,’ said Mrs Rice, in a distressed tone. ‘Don’t you think so, Miss Stapeleton?’

But Blanche’s eyes had wandered off in the direction from which the summons to the dog had come. She knew if Blunder was so near, his master could not be far off. Nor was she deceived. There indeed was Herbert coming rapidly along the path under the elms, which had thrown

their shade over generations of lovers at the Croft, some of whom had long gone to their rest, whilst others only thought of such meetings as among the very far off memories of 'long ago.' Yes, it was her own Herbert, looking bright and handsome as ever, with the same frank, kindly smile dear to her of old. The sight of him was enough to banish all anxious thoughts.

Tennis was of course at an end for that afternoon, and Herbert having been warmly greeted by all, they adjourned to Mrs Stapeleton's 'bower' for tea.

The weather was singularly warm and pleasant, so that the door leading into the garden was thrown open, and several of the tea-drinkers seated themselves on the steps, to enjoy the afternoon's freshness. Herbert, who had placed himself by Mrs

Stapeleton's couch, informed her that he had walked from the Priory, and expected his parents to bring his things when they drove over before dinner.

Colonel Stapeleton always gave a dinner-party in Easter week, and his wife had suggested his doing so, as soon as she had noticed that he was out of temper, because acting host always put him in a good humour.

In the evening there was to be a large gathering of neighbours.

'So you like Germany, Mr Marley?' asked Gretchen, who was on the other side of Mrs Stapeleton, and to whom Herbert had been addressing some remarks about the fine scenery of her native land.

'Yes, I do, very much. You have a

beautiful country, and many great thinkers amongst your people.'

'Ah, yes. We have many "long heads" as we call them. Of course you know all our great writers, Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, and perhaps also Schopenhauer, *Unser Göttlicher Arthur*. Do you know him? He is the great fashion now. *Ich schwärme für ihn*; though I have only read a few extracts from his writings. Do you not, Mr Marley?'

'I should hardly have thought he was a favourite with ladies,' said Herbert, secretly hoping the rest of those present knew little about the author in question.

'Oh! of course he is very hard on us poor women. Maman won't let me read his books. He is not a Christian, and says dreadful things of us, *ganz schrecklich*.

Vielelleicht verdienen wir es; aber vieles ist doch recht schön was er sagt, nicht wahr?
Und so gar nicht orthodox, das ist herrlich,'
Gretchen continued. She often launched into German when excited.

'No; indeed I am afraid he is anything but orthodox,' said Herbert, gravely, and earnestly wishing this enthusiastic young lady would change the subject!

The rest of the company, with the exception of Mary and the curate, who were only too glad of the opportunity for talking together under cover of the general conversation, had begun to give their attention to Gretchen's animated discourse; and before Blanche could sign to him to be quiet, Bertie put in,—

"Why, Herbert, what makes you look so serious about that fellow Schopenhauer?"

I know you read his works ; for you left a book of his here this winter.'

That was all the boy had time to remark, before his mother said something to stop him ; and Gretchen, who saw that the discussion was going further than several of those present liked, turned with ready interest to Mrs Rice, and said,—

' Now, do tell us all about the wonderful dessert-set, as you promised before going to play tennis ; how they would delight in it in Germany.'

' With pleasure,' was the pleased reply, accompanied by one of Mrs Rice's most gracious smiles ; and when she smiled, one saw what a handsome woman she had been.

After this there was no likelihood of

Schopenhauer or anything else being brought up for discussion; for once she was started on one of her favourite hobbies, Mrs Rice was like a wound-up toy, which it is impossible to stop, till it has run itself out.

She described well, and Mrs Stapeleton listened with interest to what she had to say about the queerly-shaped plates and dishes, being fond of such things, though averse to seeing a drawing-room transformed into the likeness of a kitchen by having too great an array of plates and pots fastened against its walls.

When the beauties of the new importation had been fully gone into, Mrs Rice and Miss Witherley rose to go, and as they talked of walking home by a path leading through the Croft fields, Blanche

and Herbert offered to accompany them part of the way.

It was a pleasant evening, as the rooks cawing in the old elms overhead seemed to think. Everything looked full of Easter promise of new life; trees and shrubs budding and sprouting, so that the fresh green of hopefulness met the eye everywhere.

Patches of sunlight gleamed here and there on the tender young grass, lingering as if to give a last good-night kiss to the primroses and snow-drops, which carpeted the ground.

Blanche and Herbert stood for a few minutes at the turn-stile at which Mrs Rice and Miss Witherley had left them, giving themselves silently up to the delight of being together once more, and to

the quiet enjoyment of the scene before them.

The Croft stood on a height, and from where they were, they could gaze for miles on the open country, a fertile plain, just then rich in blossom.

It was a simple English landscape; hedge-rows, fields, orchards, and here and there a few cottages clustered together, or the ivy-clad tower of a village church keeping watch over some peaceful resting-place of those, who were taking their last, long sleep.

On the far horizon, the faint, grey outline of a range of hills was traceable, and in the middle distance the spires of Denesbury, the cathedral town of the diocese, were to be seen.

Blanche and her betrothed first looked at the scene before them, then turned to

each other, their very silence telling of that pleasant ease which exists between 'hearts of each other sure.'

At length Blanche said,—

'Herbert, this is very beautiful; but I am afraid we really ought to go in.'

'Yes, darling:' and they turned into a woodland path which led back towards the house.

Then Blanche feeling, like many people when their hearts are full of some weighty thought, the necessity for beginning by a trivial topic, said,—

'I hope you will like Gretchen, Herbert. She is so amusing and good-natured. We have all grown fond of her.'

'I daresay, she is nice; yet the effect intercourse with foreigners always has on me is to make me make unflattering mental

comparisons between them and my fair fellow-country-women. I can't understand a man's marrying any girl but an English one, Blanche. They are so thorough. One doesn't want a wife who plays with infidelity and pessimism.'

Was this really true in his own case? Most likely it was. Perhaps in his heart of hearts he had more faith than he acknowledged to himself; and though he had sometimes imagined otherwise, would probably have been deeply shocked to hear the girl at his side speak with Gretchen's levity.

'Well, Herbert, you need not believe everything to the letter that my cousin says. She rattles on so fast; she doesn't stop to think how half sounds, and there is really plenty in her. But is this Schopen-

hauer really as bad as you seemed to make out to her ?'

' His are not the sort of books I should wish you to read or care for, my Blanche.'

' And yet, as Bertie said, it was a volume by Schopenhauer that you left here, and which I sent back to you at Oxford.'

Something in Herbert's face made her add,—

' Surely *you* are not taking up those opinions.'

There was an earnestness in her tone, born of all her past anxieties, which made it impossible for him to put her off with a light answer. Years might ripen his powers ; but at present hers was really the stronger character, or at any rate the most

matured ; because, whilst he had chiefly given his time to speculations, she had gathered strength and experience from the continual discipline of trying faithfully to carry out in practical everyday things, those few, simple rules of life that she believed in.

‘Tell me, tell me all,’ she said, looking up at him with her earnest eyes. ‘I would rather know.’

Herbert could not help bending his head before her. There was a mingled love and sternness in her gaze, which seemed as if it could read the depths of his soul. Had he but known, it was all love which gazed at him out of those clear, blue eyes. The sternness was put there by his conscience, which told him he had been weak, and cowardly.

'Oh, Blanche, darling, I have been so wrong. But I could not bear to face it—could not bear that anything should come between us. And I knew you would care so much.'

Then he told her all; all his wavering, all his doubts; how his mind had revolted against the teachings to which he had once believed his adherence so firm; how he found his faith had made shipwreck. Then the meeting with Mr Morton, the request to write papers on free debate in his magazine, ending in the avowal of free-thinking opinions. All, all was blurred out.

And the strong and tender woman, who stood by and listened, pitied him with her whole heart—pitied him, yearned over him, longed to help him, and knew not how. She could only pray in silence:

‘Father of lights, let thy light shine into his soul, and lead him on into peace.’

He took her hand ; she let him do so. She could not bear him to feel alone in the fight, the struggle, which she knew must come, if it had not already begun. And yet, he must in the end be alone, she could not be with him as his wife to comfort and help him. She must give him back his plighted troth. To stand before God’s altar and speak the vows of Christian marriage with a self-acknowledged denier of Christ would be a mockery—would be sacrilege.

‘Don’t let this make any change between us, Blanche. I would never seek to disturb your faith—I would—’

She withdrew her hand.

‘No, Herbert. Don’t ask it of me.

Don't, oh don't, make this harder. Your wife, as things are, I must not be ; your friend I am always.'

Steps were approaching ; they had come to a bend in the lane, and found themselves face to face with Colonel Stapeleton.

Anyone else could not have failed to notice the pale, controlled look in Blanche's face, and the emotion which Herbert's countenance betrayed. Fortunately for them, Colonel Stapeleton was not only physically but also mentally short-sighted. As to the feelings of others, he had a great capacity for riding rough-shod over them.

In this instance, it stood his daughter and Herbert Marley in good stead.

Utterly regardless of anything beyond himself, he extended his hand pompously, and said,—

'How do you do, Herbert? I am very glad to see you. We were beginning to be afraid you had found some greater attractions than the Croft can offer.'

Amid polite assurances to the contrary from Herbert, and more trivial remarks from the colonel, they reached the spot where the lane ended into the drive, and were soon at the house.

Then Blanche could go to her room and be alone with her sorrow for a short time,—though only for a very short one. Within an hour she would have to be downstairs to receive her father's guests with smiles of welcome for all, and then take her mother's place in doing the honours of his table; for Mrs Stapeleton never came into dinner, though she was wheeled into the drawing-room afterwards to see her friends.



CHAPTER IX.

A LONG SUMMER.

OH, those silent sorrows to be borne with a smiling face, while the heart is often far more worn with grief than that of many a seeming mourner, who goes about clothed from head to foot in crape.

Blanche had to learn the burthen of such a trouble. From that first evening when Herbert had come, and a separation had taken place between them, in comparison with which no mere division of space

could be as anything, she had to stretch out her hand and accept it, and not appear to flinch; and she had done it with a brave face and cheerful look for all, though her spirit quailed and felt faint beneath the load.

In life, in death, there could be but one man whom she could really love; that man was Herbert Marley.

And yet, just because she loved him as her own soul, it was all the more needful that he should see, she could give him up for the sake of her faith and her God. If she faltered, if she showed him the earthly love could be put before the higher one, she knew her weakness would be their ruin.

If he was to be strengthened, she must be strong.

The prayer, ‘Father of lights, shed on my beloved the light of Thy truth,’ became her daily constant cry, as she went about fulfilling her usual duties amongst her family and her father’s guests; for a succession of visitors came to stay at the Croft, and the house was filled to overflowing for the following six weeks.

Though the outside world made their remarks and surmises as to there seeming to be obstacles to the expected match between Mr Marley and Miss Stapeleton, it was only necessary, as the engagement had never been made public, that the immediate home circle of the two families should really know anything of what had taken place.

The way in which the various members looked upon Blanche’s decision and the

cause which had led to it, was highly characteristic of them.

Squire Marley was very disappointed and very angry with Herbert for what he termed his ‘nonsensical notions,’ which made him lose the chance of having ‘such a splendid girl for his wife.’ Why young men were not content to believe what their parents did, as had been the way when he was young, instead of striking out lines of thought for themselves, was what he could not understand.

As to the duration of Herbert’s notions, he did not feel any anxiety, and prophesied that a few years would rid him of them, and bring him back to his senses. In the meanwhile, however, it was very provoking, and he was quite sure that in some way or other ‘those parsons at Saint

Ethelred's' were at the bottom of the business. He had 'no patience with their foolishness.'

Mrs Marley was distressed also ; but that she kept to herself and Herbert. To the rest, she still appeared to believe her darling son incapable of doing wrong, and told the squire that very likely, if Blanche had shown more patience with Herbert, as an older woman might have done, things would have been all right. Young people, severe in the consciousness of their own innocence, were such harsh judges.

Colonel Stapeleton was very annoyed, and showed it Blanche on every occasion by grim politeness and much sarcasm. Being a man of no real religious convictions himself, he looked on the whole matter as a crotchet on his daughter's

part. If Herbert was well-conducted in other respects, and ready to make her his wife, what did it matter if he had his own way of looking at things? Men's ideas on those subjects were always more liberal than women's, which, in the colonel's language, meant more easy-going.

In her mother, Blanche found the only real sympathiser; one who, by her readiness to understand and her tact in showing what she knew, made that time, hard as it was, far lighter than it could otherwise have been.

But in such a sorrow, even the most tender comforter could only help, or at least chiefly do so, by love and silence.

All her life long Blanche will not forget the heartache and weariness of that even-

ing on which she had broken off her engagement.

Knowing how talking about it would overcome her, and how little time there was for preparing to meet the coming guests with the courtesy which betrays nothing, she had not dared to take her sorrow at once to her mother's couch, to be poured out to the one person in whom, from her babyhood upwards, she had ever found a ready listener; and thus Mrs Stapeleton, knowing nothing of what had come to pass, and feeling very tired after having had to attend to the lively chatter of Mrs Rice, only showed herself in the drawing-room for half-an-hour after dinner, and then let herself be carried away to her room, leaving all the more onerous duties to Blanche.

Mary was no help to her sister ; she never shone greatly in society ; and the family comment was, that when the curate had been at the Croft she seemed to have less to say than ever.

Blanche had to make herself agreeable to old Lady Ansley, a crabbed dowager, who made a point of contradicting everything that was said to her, and had a most unpleasant way of putting up her eye-glass, fixing her gaze steadily on the person to whom she was talking, and, if this happened to be a young lady, prefacing severe remarks on the present generation by—

‘ Really, it is perfectly terrible what girls will do now-a-days ! ’

Luckily, just as Blanche was writhing under some speech to the effect that she was looking pale, and that young people

were so foolish about thinking nothing a fatigue where their pleasure was concerned, her father had come to the rescue by suggesting a game of whist to Lady Ansley.

This had also provided for Mrs Marley, whose sharp eyes Blanche had felt rather than seen, constantly directed towards her during the evening.

But, then, there had been a fresh tormentor in the squire, who did not play whist, and came up to speak of Herbert, and say how glad he was to have his son home again, and express a wish to see Blanche ere long on a visit of considerable length at the Priory.

And all the while Blanche had been conscious of a good deal of conversation going on between Gretchen and Herbert.

At last the young countess, who had

been singing, was seated at the piano, and Herbert was leaning over it turning over a pile of songs, and listening as she descended on the relative merits of different German masters.

Gretchen was looking up at him with that eager look which was natural to her when interested ; and, of course, Blanche could only judge from appearances, which seemed to indicate that Herbert was getting over his aversion to foreign young ladies, or, at any rate, was making an exception in favour of present company. She could not know that he had gladly retired to a corner, where Gretchen von Herberstein's great conversational powers only required of him to put in a word here and there, just because he had found it as hard as herself to look cheerful and

interested in what others were talking about.

Indeed, he felt even more miserable than Blanche ; for, whilst her conscience was clear, his could not exonerate him from cowardice towards her, nor could he shake off the feeling that but for him there would have been no need for the brave fight, which he knew she was carrying on in her heart, all the while that she went about fulfilling her social duties.

The following morning, after an interview with Colonel Stapeleton, Herbert left for Scotland, to stay, so the world was told, with his mother's people, to whom he had long owed a visit.

Then a weary round of tennis and dinner parties followed for Blanche, with

a houseful of guests to entertain at all hours.

It had been settled for some time that Gretchen von Herberstein should go to stay at the Priory as soon as the various visitors had left the Croft, whom Colonel Stapeleton had specially wished asked for his niece to see something of English society. Blanche was to have gone also. Now, of course, she would not ; for Herbert was to be home from Aberdeenshire. However, as neither the Marleys nor the Stapeletons wished it to appear as if any alteration had taken place in the friendly intercourse between their respective families, it was decided that Mary should accompany her cousin.

In this wise, Blanche had the opportunity, if so inclined, during ten days, of

picturing to herself how Gretchen and Herbert were thrown continually into each other's society, he, perhaps, playing piece after piece to her as he had once done for his betrothed, and she sitting in that very same seat on the hearth once occupied by Blanche in those happy days, which seemed so very far off.

Of course she could repeat over and over again to herself that these might all be mere fancies ; that Herbert was free, and other excellent reasons for not continuing to let her thoughts dwell anxiously on the Priory and its inmates ; but we all know of how little use it is attempting to reason ourselves out of broodings of this kind. And when the ten days lengthened

into a fortnight, and Gretchen at length returned to the Croft, full of the delights of her visit, the kindness of her hosts, and the anxiety ‘Monsieur Herbert’ showed to make the time pass pleasantly for her, it must be confessed that Blanche, instead of putting a good deal down to her cousin’s enthusiasm for a life which was so new to her, felt she would rather not hear anything about it. She was quite relieved, when soon after that the elder Countess Herberstein wrote to say she wished her daughter to come home to be present at the Court festivities, which were to take place in honour of the approaching marriage of the hereditary prince of the small German state, where she resided; and

that, when the *fêtes* were over, she would go with Gretchen to Wiesbaden, where several crowned heads were to meet, and the season was sure to be brilliant.

An escort to Germany being found for Gretchen, she obeyed her mother's summons and bade farewell to the Croft, where everybody regretted her more or less ; even Blanche, once her cousin was gone, feeling she had lost a pleasant companion.

After this, the early summer passed drearily. The colonel kept up his frigid politeness towards Blanche, seeming in nowise inclined to forgive her for breaking off her engagement.

Mrs Stapeleton was not so well, and her

two elder daughters had to be in constant attendance on her; consequently Blanche's influence was missed in the school-room, and the quarrels between Florry, Daisy, and Bertie proved so continual, that Miss Davis was fairly worn-out, and announced her intention of leaving when the holidays began.

When Blanche, weary with night-warnings and anxiety went to her own room for rest, she generally received a hint that her presence was sorely needed in the school-room, to make peace where Mary's quick interference had only increased the tumult.

Altogether, she began to feel life's cares weigh heavily on her.

Many of the pleasantest neighbours were away, and the Priory was shut up. Mrs Marley could not do without her London season, and the squire, though he felt out of his element in a town life, had to yield.

In former years both Blanche and Mary had joined them for a while in London; for Mrs Stapeleton was glad her daughters should see something of society under Mrs Marley's *chaperonage*, as she was unable to take them out herself.

Now, Mary was to go if her mother's health improved. Blanche would not do so under any circumstances, not wishing to run the risk of meeting Herbert,

who had left Oxford, taking a musical degree.

The young man had not come out in honours, as his parents expected, the course he had been led into by Mr Morton having interfered too much with his studies.

He went out a good deal in London, and people, from his own county, still wondered whether a marriage would be made up between him and Lady Margaret Cardross ; but they were seldom seen together, and the rumour died out.

At the end of July he went abroad to stay some months ; and about the same time his parents returned home.

In the course of a few days, Mrs

Marley drove over to the Croft, found Mrs Stapeleton decidedly better and Blanche looking worn and white.

'You are coming home with me,' she said to the latter, in that pleasantly decided way, which she used towards her favourites. 'You want a change very much, I see. If you had let me know how worn-out you all were, I should have been here sooner.'

Blanche demurred.

'Oh! I don't think I can leave home, dear Mrs Marley!'

'Never mind what you think. You are coming with me, my dear. The squire is not very well, and he wants you.'

So Blanche went.

Squire Marley was not well, nor had he been so for some time; only in London his wife had been too much occupied with her various engagements to notice it, till he was taken ill one day at his club. Then she became anxious, though keeping it, as was her wont, to herself.

At the time of his seizure he had fallen and hurt his knee, which made him unable, even after his recovery, to attempt much exercise, and being a stout man, and accustomed to go about a great deal, he suffered from this compulsory inactivity.

When Blanche reached the Priory, and

he came into the hall leaning on a stick to greet her, she thought his figure had lost much of its vigorous look, and that his handsome, kindly face was wrinkled and drawn as she had never seen it before.

‘The fact is, it is beginning to go down the hill with me, Blanche,’ he said, smiling, in answer to her inquiry after his health; ‘and once that is so, I find nobody ever goes up again; at least, not till making a fresh start, altogether. And that does not take place here.’

It was not often that he spoke like that, and it struck Blanche very much, though she answered lightly,—

'Oh, you mustn't be downhearted now I am come to cheer you. I hope to see you looking quite yourself again before I go back to the Croft.'

Yet the old man was failing, failing steadily.

It had been hot in London, and the different life there, the late hours, the many dinners, all the constant round of gaieties to which his wife wished him to accompany her, and to which he had therefore made an effort to go; all these had told on him.

In the winter he had been fairly well, though he had not cared to ride as hard as formerly. But now, the separation between Blanche and his son had

grieved him deeply, and he had suffered from his sorrow in body as well as in mind.

He had set his whole heart on Blanche being Herbert's wife, so that when the time came for him to sleep his last sleep, he might go to his rest feeling the trust of his great estates would be nobly held and carefully applied. Blanche's practical common sense and real goodness would both help and be tempered by Herbert's wealth of thought.

The quiet days spent at Marley were very restful to Blanche. It was true there was the pain of going about the old haunts so full of associations with the days when Herbert had been hers;

but there was a great deal of pleasure of a certain sort mixed up with the pain.

“Tis better to have loved and lost, than never loved at all.”

There was a deep truth for Blanche in this thought.

Then Mrs Marley was very kind, and seemed quite to have got over any resentment she had felt towards the girl who was to have been her daughter-in-law.

Most of all it was a pleasure to Blanche to find that she was really of use in cheering the squire, who would sit at her side on the lawn or terrace by the hour together, talking of all the improvements he wished to make on the

estate, both for the sake of the property and the tenants. She did not know that he did this because he still clung to the hope that all might yet come right, and that in speaking to her he might be telling his wishes to his son's future wife.

It was no wonder, Blanche thought, he should love the Priory ; for, added to the love a man would naturally feel towards the place where his family had dwelt for generations, Marley was a spot to which anyone might have grown attached.

Not only was the house rich in historic interest, but the property also owned many natural beauties.

Fine old oak and alder trees surrounded the lawn, and reached down to where the river Dene threaded its silvery way amidst fairy dells, abounding in ferns and moss.

The view towards Denesbury and over the fertile plain, rich in orchards weighted with fruit, which lay between, was likewise very beautiful. But one of the chief charms of Marley was the terrace on the south side, where stately cedars overshadowed turf of as tender a green as could be seen anywhere in grass-endowed England. This had been Blanche's favourite lounging place since childish days, when she and Herbert had mingled their tears there over the grave of a favourite

fox-terrier. Now, the forget-me-nots they had planted had long withered, and the tide of forgetfulness had swept over many other things dear in the past.

During this visit to Marley, Blanche often sat under the cedar trees, on a quaintly-carved stone seat, dating from pre-Reformation times, and bearing a half-obliterated inscription, telling by what prior it was placed there.

She had often sat there before, but it had been with the son of the broken-down man who was now generally to be found at her side. Oh, could it all be again as it once had been?

Strange fancies would come to her as she listened to the good old squire talking

of all these fair possessions, almost as if he thought she had a special right to be interested in them. Might not he, for whose sake above all she loved the fair land stretched out before her, come back to her yet ; come back because he had renewed his devotion to a higher allegiance, without which she could not be his ?

No, she must not indulge such vain thoughts. He was free ; he might already have found another woman better able to enter into his speculations and embrace his views. And with this, against her will, a vision of her German cousin's large eyes and smiling lips *would* force itself into her mind.

And Blanche herself? Ah, she could love no other, though duty might keep her asunder from the only man she could love.

Unfortunately, a circumstance happened which went a long way towards undoing all the good this visit to Marley had done her; for though she fought bravely to put it away from her, still she could not help its temporarily disturbing her peace.

This was what it was. On the afternoon previous to the day on which she was to leave the Priory, Captain Crawfurd was announced. She was alone in the hall when he was ushered in, and courtesy forbade her making her escape, as inclina-

tion prompted. She had disliked the man from the first, and at the same time felt bewildered by his volubility.

'Delighted to see you, Miss Stapeleton,' he said, with a would-be fascinating smile, but for which Blanche disliked him all the more. 'It is a vewy long time since we met, vewy long, indeed. Had hoped to see you in town. Mrs Marley gave a capital dance, quite charming. Don't think I enjoyed any other so much this season.'

'Were you long in London?' asked Blanche, by way of something to say.

'No, not vewy. Couldn't get enough leave, you know. Our colonel is vewy stiff about that. Besides, was obliged to go

to Germany to see my mother ; filial duty and all that ; quite pwopaw, isn't it ?'

' Quite,' said Blanche, drily.

' My mother is always thinking she is ill, and must twy this or that doctor or system, or go to some baths. Nervous old lady, indeed, exceedingly so. Chose Wiesbaden this time, thought it would amuse my sisters ; fond of a little gaiety, you know. Poor things, don't get much of it, buwied half their lives in a Somersetshire village. Vewy deplorable. Just come back from Wiesbaden myself, saw Marley there ; begged me to bring back small parcel for his mother ; breakable he said. Was afraid to carry it about. Vewy glad to do it ; still rather a bore you know. Awful

responsibility. Thought I'd call as soon as possible ; get wid of it. Then Mrs Marley might be glad to know how her son was. Mothers are always vewy anxious ; know it from my own. Marley looked well ; amusing himself vewy much ; seemed to be always with some Germans, Herbersteins. Yes, that was the name. Mother English by birth, married some foreign fellow ; daughter not pretty. No, not exactly pretty, but pleasant face and clevaw. Wather fond, so have been told, of saying startling things—not quite orthodox, you know—goes in for being thought enlightened. Would suit Marley, should think. That's his line, atheistic, and all that sort of thing.'

'Oh, how d'ye do?—glad to see you able to walk. Heard you had been vewy ill.'

Blanche was truly glad to see the squire open the door, and thus give a chance for the tide of conversation being turned into a different channel.

Poor girl, it was hard that this encounter should have taken place. It seemed as if rest and peace were to be things unknown to her; as if the one great sorrow, instead of being healed, in part at least, by time, the great consoler, were to be the forerunner of a long chain of others; as if the first deep wound were destined constantly to receive fresh rubs.

To look at it in another light, the days

had come when she too was to learn by real, personal experience how, in the words she had once sung for Herbert,—

'As the gold must be tried in the fire,
So the heart must be tried by pain.'





CHAPTER X.

HARVEST-HOME PREPARATIONS.

'We've ploughed, we've sown ;
We've reaped, we've mown,
And now we sing, " Harvest Home."'

MID the singing of these old country rhymes, the last sheaf had been carried on the Marley estates, and tenants, young and old, looked forward to the annual festival, which followed on the gathering in of the corn, the

only other day of the year, excepting Christmas, when the Priory gates were thrown open, that the dwellers on the soil might one and all meet the owners and keep holiday with them ; when Mrs Marley was unusually gracious and unbending, and the squire, though always cordial, seemed particularly to find his greatest happiness in moving about amongst his people, seeing them enjoy themselves, and enjoying himself with them.

‘ ‘ I do’ant believe squoire’s ’alf so mooch at ’ome at them big parties, I ’ears ’e gives in Lunnun, as ’e be ’ere among us,’ was the regular yearly speech of Betsy Pratt, the oldest inhabitant of the village, who delighted in bringing out this stock-

remark for the edification of any persons who would listen, whenever the season for one of the afore-mentioned festivities drew near. To help in these, the young people from the Croft were always in request.

‘ DEAREST BLANCHE,—We cannot do without any of your skilful hands for our harvest-home preparations. The squire says, “ Tell them they are all to consider themselves on duty, from Blanche to Daisy, for the next two days; and after that they must appear again on the third, to be here again from ten A.M. for church, speechifying, children-stuffing, etc.”

‘ So you see, my dear, you cannot

escape. Accept your fate resignedly,
and DO NOT disappoint — Your truly
affectionate

‘ADELAIDE MARLEY.’

Such was the communication received by Blanche one morning towards the middle of September; and it was one which gave special delight to the younger members of the family. Bertie declared the Marleys’ harvest-home to be the ‘jolliest thing possible.’ There was always a great deal more fun there than at their own; and so many more people came to it.

This verdict nobody seemed disposed to contradict.

It is true Bertie’s preference may have

been partly owing to the fact of his finding himself of more importance at the Priory than at home ; but it was also quite true that Squire Marley's genial manner, the well-chosen words he had for each and all, and his talent for making every one feel thoroughly at ease, made any festal gatherings on his estate bright, and none more so than those where high and low mingled together in simple good fellowship.

For the next two days, after Mrs Marley's note had been received by Blanche, every one was busy, and the Croft pony-carriage went backwards and forwards to and from the Priory laden with green trails and boughs of all sorts ; whilst Dick, who was once more at home, scoured the

surrounding country with Bertie for supplies, a very large amount being needed to decorate the village church, the tents where the children were to be feasted, and the large barn where the grown-up people were to sup.

Blanche, Mary, Florry, and Daisy were hard at work twisting hops, briars, and ivy into wreaths and garlands, and making texts and devices with corn, heather, fruit, and flowers of various kinds.

Mrs Marley was here, there, and everywhere arranging all, forgetting nothing. And Dick drove the squire down to the church, that he, too, might see how matters were getting on there. In other years the old gentleman had been, at least,

as active as his wife in assisting at the preparations ; now ! alas, it was evidently an effort to him to be cheerful and show himself at all.

At all previous harvest-homes, as long back as Blanche could remember, Herbert had been with them, ever ready to lend a hand or hold a ladder, and sometimes cheering on the workers in the church by playing such music for them as Brownjohn, the old blower, said he never ‘eerd the loike on, ‘ceptin’ when Master Marley coomed ‘ome.’

This year, alas ! he was far away ; gone, so rumour reported, to be present at some meeting in Germany, held for the purpose of strengthening the hands of those who

desired the overthrow of all churches and religious systems, and intended to proclaim a far higher, freer, better state of things; though how that was to be brought about, or what they proposed substituting in place of the institutions of the past, seemed difficult to explain satisfactorily.

Herbert, hearing how far from well his father was, had come home for a while in the summer, but purposely absented himself from the harvest-home, wishing for several reasons to stay away. He knew such a speech as his state of mind would not allow of his making, was sure to be expected from him at the supper —a speech in which sound traditional

opinions on church and state would have to be at least hinted at, and in which the listening tenants might trace an earnest of one day finding just such a landlord in the heir, as they had known in his father.

All of this, though only realised by him in part, sorely tried Squire Marley, who wished for no enthusiast, no abstruse speculator in his son, but a thorough English country gentleman, who would ride to hounds well, be on a good footing with his dependants, and hold his own in the county. Yet Herbert was so considerate and respectful towards him that he could not find it in his heart to nurse his wrath, and, with a display of tact

hardly to have been expected of him, wisely forbore reference to the subjects on which they were at two, thinking opposition and arguments would only make matters worse, and still holding fast the hope that time might best show the young man the error of his ways.

But to return to the decorations and decorators.

At six o'clock on the evening of the second day after they had begun their labours, Blanche, as head of the busy band, gave a last look round the church to see that everything was finished to her satisfaction, and then, turning to the squire, who was leaning on his stick in the porch, said,—

‘I think it will do so. Everything is up excepting the cross above the altar; that will be all the fresher for being kept in the cellar to-night. Will you please remind Smith to put it up just before service time to-morrow morning?’

‘Yes, my dear; and thank you all very much for the trouble you have taken. I am sure you have all done your share valiantly towards making these the prettiest decorations we have had yet. I hope everything will go off well, and that each one will enjoy it. This may be the last time I shall be spared to appear amongst my people, and I should like them to look back on the day as a happy one.’

‘Come, we cannot have you talking like

VOL. I.

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that. You know you always say the Marleys are tough, and a long-lived race ; and we expect you to keep up the family tradition,' Blanche replied, promptly.

'Of course we do,' came in chorus from Mary, Dick, Bertie, Florry, and Daisy, who had come up at that moment, and overheard the last remark.

'Thank you, thank you, my dears,' said the old man, with a kindly, though rather weary smile.

'Now, Dick, drive me home, and then come and fetch your big load. How can you manage to stow away so many ?'

'Oh, you see we have brought the waggonette this time, and can all bundle in.'

'The more the merrier, I suppose.
Good-night. God bless you all!'

Squire Marley let himself be helped into the carriage by Blanche and Dick, and waved his hand in farewell to the group assembled in the porch, who watched him as he drove away.

'I am afraid he is right, and that we shall not have him much longer,' Mary remarked, in a sad tone.

'Nonsense,' Blanche put in rather sharply, because she felt the truth of this statement. A certain amount of impatience, generally well kept in check, but sometimes gaining the upper hand, and a certain unlovely stiffness or want of graciousness of manner displayed now

and then, chiefly when something touched her keenly ; from these defects in her younger days I cannot exculpate my heroine. Those who knew her well loved her dearly, not only in spite of —one might almost say for—these imperfections. Perhaps, if she had not had them to battle with, she would not have been so noble a woman.

When the waggonette-load of Stapeletons reached the Croft, all went to their mother's sitting-room to tell her, according to family custom, about the events of the day.

If a friend asked Mrs Stapeleton if she did not find it tiring to have such a talkative young troop round her at once,

she told the inquirer it was well worth any fatigue to be looked upon as a companion and sharer in their interests by her children ; for she found that, in consequence of this, they were all ready to come to her when in any trouble or doubt.

‘ Oh ! mother, I only wish you could come with us to-morrow, and enjoy yourself like other people. The barn, where the tenants are to sup, looks awfully jolly,’ said Bertie. ‘ Dai and I made the old rhyme about ploughing and mowing, and all that, in heather letters, on a white ground, with fern border, to put at the end, just above where the squire will sit, you know.’

‘ Yes, mother,’ put in Florry ; ‘ and I

and Farmer Ridgeway's daughters made the wreaths of box and ivy to hang all round the room, and hung up the Chinese lanterns in between ; and Bertie and Dai helped us to make a big "Marley Harvest Home," and the date in wheat, and put it up opposite the squire's place.'

'Oh, and lots more besides,' added Daisy.

'Who decorated the church ?' asked Mrs Stapeleton.

'Blanche and Mary and I,' said Dick. 'And I think it looks prettier than it ever did before. There is such a lot of fruit and flowers and corn, and even vegetables. I made a pyramid round each pillar. The girls didn't like the idea at

first; but when it was done, they condescended to approve.'

'And I do not see anything to object to in bringing samples of the different fruits of the earth for decoration at our thanksgiving service,' said his mother.

'Mrs Marley told me they would give away all the fruit and vegetables amongst the sick poor after service. A nice idea, I thought.'

Whilst she listened to and talked with the younger ones, she was all the time quietly watching her eldest daughter, knowing that the church decorations must have been trying to her, bringing back a host of recollections of similar times, when she had one at her side to help

her, who then took, at least, as keen an interest in all things pertaining to beauty of worship as herself, yet had since erred from the faith.

Blanche looked wonderfully bright. What longings for the renewal of past joys the associations of the day might have awoke in her heart, were steadily kept under, and she looked happy, as was her wont, when she felt she had been useful.

This last sentence need not be taken in any 'goody' sense. It simply refers to the fact, that she was one of those women to whom, to be really of use, and that not necessarily to those to whom she felt personal attachment,

was one of the first necessities of her being.

To some the need of being loved, to others that of loving, fills this place; but there was a certain independence and energy about Blanche which made it more important to her that there should be some one to lean on her, rather than some one on whom she could lean.

In short, hers was a nature in which the knowledge that she was of service generated satisfaction for herself, and attachment towards the person she benefitted.

‘Well, Blanche, and are you satisfied with your workers?’ her mother asked.

‘Yes, quite, mother darling. They

were a great help, and Mrs Marley seemed very glad to have us. So did the squire.'

'And was he able to inspect what was being done?'

'Yes. Dick drove him down to the church and back again to the Priory; and he was very nice.'

'As he always is,' added Florry. 'But oh, mother,' she went on, in a lower tone, 'he spoke so sadly, as if he thought he would never be amongst us again at another Harvest-Home. It gave me quite a *creepy* feeling.'

'Did it, my Florry? You must not look forward too anxiously. Remember what the squire will like best is,

that you should all look bright to-morrow.'

Florry, however, though she said no more, refused in her secret heart to be comforted. She was of an easily-alarmed disposition, and often suffered severely, how severely none besides herself knew, from forebodings, which were happily for the most part contradicted by the actual course of events.

There was a little more talk about the prospect of fine weather; Dick looked at the barometer, and said it was higher than it had been for a fortnight, Blanche agreed with him, and added that the wind was also in their favour,—in short, all spoke with pleasure of the coming

day, and then went off to dress for the evening.

Their mother let them do so with a smiling face ; nevertheless, when they were all gone, her thoughts went back again and again to what she had heard about Squire Marley, and she could not get Florry's awed look out of her head. An unusual circumstance, for, with her sound common-sense, she had time upon time laughed away fears, expressed on one subject or another by her anxious-minded child.

Perhaps, one reason for her being more impressed on this occasion by what Florry had said, was, that she cherished a deep and true friendship for Richard Marley ;

and had felt very sure, that the breaking off of the engagement between his son and her daughter, would tell on his failing health and spirits, in a very great degree.

Early next morning all were on the look-out to see 'if the barometer had told the truth,' as Daisy expressed it.

They were not disappointed.

It was as bright a September day as could well be seen.

At a quarter-past nine, the waggonette was to be at the door to take the whole party of workers, with the addition of Colonel Stapeleton, to the Priory.

At eight o'clock, Blanche was already presiding at the school-room breakfast, which had become a habit with her ever

since Miss Davis had taken her departure. The unruly throng there, hailed with delight the advent of this regent during the unavoidable interregnum between the change of governesses, and were much pleased that their mother had not yet succeeded in finding a suitable successor to the last instructress.

‘Throw open the window, and let the sun in,’ Blanche said to Florry. ‘It is so much warmer out-of-doors than in the house.’

The girl obeyed, then stood, as if listening. ‘The Wednesley bell is tolling,’ she said, anxiously. Wednesley was the post-town both for Marley and the Croft, and lay half-way between the two places.

‘Silly child,’ Blanche answered. ‘It is more likely that the Priory bells are ringing, and the wind sends the sound this way.’

‘No, indeed, it isn’t, Blanche; it is really tolling. Some one must be dead.’

‘Nonsense,’ put in Dick. ‘Come and finish your breakfast, or you will keep us waiting, Florry. You are always late.’

‘No, I’m not, Dick. But, oh, Blanche what can it be—surely not—’

‘Surely not, what? If the bell is tolling, Florry, we cannot know for whom. There are lots of sick and old people in Wednesday.’

‘Oh, yes, I know; still this time, I am

quite sure. I felt it would be so from the first—'

The school-room door opened, and Colonel Stapeleton appeared on the threshold, looking white and flurried. His usual pompous manner was almost entirely laid aside.

'Blanche.'

'What, father?'

'Come here, I wish to speak to you.'

Blanche was about to get up and follow him out of the room; but Florry clung to her, whilst the others sat still in their places, looking surprised, and feeling vaguely as if something strange and sad had happened.

'Let me go, Florry, darling. Don't you

see father is waiting for me ?' and Blanche tried gently but firmly to disengage herself from the arm her sister had clasped so tightly round her.

But Florry continued to cling to her, exclaiming,—

' Oh, no, no ! it is not of any use trying to hide it from me. I know quite well for whom the bell is tolling.'

' How this can be I don't understand, for I have only just learnt the news myself from a messenger from Marley,' said Colonel Stapeleton. ' But, as you seem to have some idea of it, I may as well tell you all now. My old friend Richard Marley is *dead*.'

It was true, only too true. The

friend not only of Colonel Stapeleton, but the loyal-hearted friend of many another, both of high and low degree, had passed away.

Instead of a joyful meeting between landlord and tenants, master and servants, that day at Marley Priory, the cry of the mourner, the hushed tread which tells of the presence of death in a house, was known there.

No more—no more for ever would the hoary head, the kindly smile, the sturdy figure of that fine old English gentleman, that type of a country squire, be seen on the great estate, where all who knew had loved him. Suddenly the summons had come, and Richard Marley had

been called away from that fair scene of earthly beauty, from those grand ancestral halls—called away to go to his long home, where, as he had pathetically said, even those who have gone down the hill here will ‘make a fresh start,’ and ‘their strength will be renewed like an eagle.’ His had been a life, not perhaps of great sorrows, if we except the first grief at loss of wife and child, but of constant vexations and misunderstandings, patiently borne and successfully hid under a bright unselfishness worthy of the bravest martyr spirit the world ever knew. The world of gossips, ever ready to judge, ever hasty in coming to a conclusion, almost necessarily wrong from its ignorance of the

real facts of the case on which it pronounces sentence, had ended by saying, that the owner of Marley Priory had been fortunate in his choice of a second wife ; that there was reason for him to be thankful to be married to one whose hereditary position and personal dignity could do so much for the furthering of his importance and influence in the county ; and finally, that there was no doubt Mrs Marley had been a faithful spouse to him.

And this was the same world which had shaken its would-be knowing head when the match had taken place, had prophesied a separation, and ascribed many unworthy motives to the squire.

Does it need an apostle to inform us from

whence that little evil-spreading member is set on fire, which is always so ready to circulate unfounded reports, *that its owner may be found a pleasant companion?* Surely some of the children of this world, so wise in their generation, so practised in the art of hurling small envenomed darts at each other, which are well aimed and sure to rankle where they strike, must know too well to need any further telling that they are inspired of the evil one.

And so in the present case few knew, fewer still cared to know, really much, though their opinion had undergone some modification, of the inner life of Adelaide Marley's husband, and how valiantly he had taken up his daily burden, carrying

it silently, smilingly, asking no sympathy of any man, seeking no new friend to whom to unbosom himself, once a barrier had risen up between himself and his cousin Cyril, living his life with a brave selflessness, which was all the more beautiful, because it was unconscious.

Perhaps no one understood him better or as well as Mrs Stapeleton, and this not only on account of her sympathetic, observant nature, but because there was a similarity in the cross laid upon them.

Reader, as we at least know something of the unaffected goodness of this simple-hearted man, let us mingle our tears with those of many other mourners,

and call after him, as the coffin closes over his mortal remains, a wish that he may rest in peace till the day when the secrets of all hearts shall be revealed, and the good, unacknowledged here, rewarded.

END OF VOL. I.

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